



**WILLIAM  
H.  
SYLVVIS**

*and the* **NATIONAL  
LABOR UNION**

A history of the first national federation of trade unions  
in the United States and an account of the life and  
work of its founder—the outstanding labor leader of  
the Civil War period.

**BY CHARLOTTE TODES**

William H. Sylvis AND THE  
National Labor Union

*Charlotte Todes*



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*What would it profit us as a nation were we to preserve our institutions and destroy the morale of the people; save our Constitution and sink the masses into hopeless ignorance, poverty, and crime; all the forms of our republican institutions to remain on the statute books and the great body of people sunk so low as to be incapable of comprehending their most simple and essential principles, with the wealth of the nation concentrated in the hands of the few, and the toiling many reduced to squalid poverty and utter dependence on the lords of the land?*

From an address by William H. Sylvis at the convention of the Iron Molders International Union in 1865.

## INTRODUCTION

William H. Sylvis was America's foremost labor leader at a time when industrial expansion, ushered in by the Civil War, brought in its wake a new labor movement. While white and Negro, side by side, were giving their lives to blot out slavery, a great upsurge of labor was simultaneously laying the foundations of the future labor movement of America. The lives of American workingmen and farmers came to be dominated increasingly by the power of a small group of financiers, manufacturers, and merchants who had accumulated vast wealth out of the exigencies of a war situation. To be a wage earner was fast becoming the way of life of larger sections of the American population. Extremes of poverty and wealth were apparent everywhere. Discontented with their status as wage earners, workingmen persisted in their hope of sharing in the wealth which their increasing productivity was creating and of keeping accessible the vast public lands being given to corporations bent on power and domination.

The Jeffersonian tradition of a republic of free and independent mechanics and farmers continued as the basic philosophy of the common people. The one and a half million German, Irish, and other immigrants who had entered the country in the decade of the 'fifties, to escape famine and tyranny in the Old World, had strengthened the will to realize these concepts. Anti-monopoly sentiment against encroachments and usurpation of authority of the privileged few was widespread among workers and farmers. To them the inalienable rights of the people affirmed



in the Declaration of Independence were something more than mere glittering generalities. Labor aspired to be free, to have the right to leisure and decent living standards, to equality of opportunity, to free land and free education. Workingmen and farmers both conceived of a nation of small producers as the basis for perpetuating the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy.

But a new struggle was already beginning to take form. The victory over the Southern slaveholders and the emancipation of the Negroes from chattel slavery had cleared the way for the advance of capitalism. A new "irrepressible conflict" was shaping itself: the struggle between corporate capital and labor.

In this period of transition and of changing social relationships, William H. Sylvis came forward as a leader of labor and its most articulate spokesman. With little experience and few precedents to guide him, he succeeded in establishing one of the great national craft unions of America, the International Molders Union. He initiated and guided the course of the National Labor Union, America's first national federation of unions and workingmen's organizations, which exerted wide influence from 1866 to 1870. He gave unparalleled energy to the task of improving the status of the workingmen as wage earners, sought to bring their class needs to the forefront through the formation of a labor party, and to increase labor's power and strength through ties of international solidarity. Indeed, it may well be said that so completely did he identify his life with that of the labor movement that the history of labor in the 'sixties cannot be separated from the life and work of William H. Sylvis.

## I. EARLY YEARS

William H. Sylvis stemmed from a family which had endured the hardships and rigors of the early American pioneers. Of Irish-French parentage, Sylvis was born in Armagh, Indiana County, Pennsylvania, on November 26, 1828, the second son of ten children. His father, a wagon maker, worked now as a journeyman and now as a small businessman and moved from place to place in search of a better livelihood. The children were pressed into work as soon as they were able. Because of the distance to schools and the need for their labor, the boys did not even succeed in mastering the rudiments of a common school education. Bankrupted by the crisis of 1837, his father was forced to leave home and tramp from place to place for work. William went to live with a wealthy family and worked on the farm and in the household in return for his upkeep. Here he managed to get only three months of schooling each year. Whatever learning he acquired was the result of his own persistent efforts to improve himself. It is said that he learned to write only later, after he had been elected secretary of his local union in 1857 and had been obliged to engage in correspondence with other local secretaries.<sup>1</sup>

At the age of eighteen he returned home to aid his father in establishing a wagon shop which proved unsuccessful. He then sought employment in an iron foundry where he later learned the trade of iron molding, and tried his hand alternately as journeyman and small owner. Until 1852 when

he married and moved to Philadelphia, he continued to send all that he could spare of his earnings, beyond his own bare needs, to support his impoverished family. In Philadelphia, he found employment as a journeyman molder at wages which scarcely provided for his family's needs. It is said that at this time he became "a great reader and student of politics and especially of the elementary principles of political economy," although his letters continued to show a "lamentable deficiency" in spelling and grammar.<sup>2</sup>

As early as 1855 the iron molders of Philadelphia had organized a local union but it was not until the crisis of 1857 that Sylvis came into the labor movement. To resist a 12 per cent reduction in wages, Sylvis and the iron molders in his shop, among whom were union men, pledged not to accept the wage cut and declared a strike. Sylvis became secretary of the shop organization and an active member of the picketing committee called the "Committee on Corners," which posted men at the corners of streets to watch for scabs. He proved to be a zealous striker and was among the few men who kept their pledge not to return to work at the reduced pay. Admitted into membership in the union together with his fellow shop workers in December, 1857, he was elected recording secretary the following month. This marked the beginning of his career as an active trade unionist. Despite many obstacles he worked at his trade and now devoted his time and interests entirely to building and extending the molders' union nationally and to the wider problems confronting workingmen.

### The Labor Movement in the 'Fifties

Sylvis' first efforts in the Iron Molders Union in the late 'fifties were overshadowed by the larger drama of the unfolding of the anti-slavery crisis. Forces of widely varying convictions and purposes had united in the Republican Party which was formed, in 1856, as the common rallying ground against the continued expansion of slavery. Abolitionists and free soilers, workingmen, farmers of the West, free Negroes, small businessmen and manufacturers, whether Whig, Democrat, or Socialist, had joined together. They comprised those seeking to preserve the Union against division, those determined not to yield another inch of America's free soil to the slave system, those who saw the need of abolishing slavery if labor was to safeguard its interests. All of these groups were girding themselves for a showdown with the politically powerful slavocracy of the South and their supporters among the financiers and merchants of the North. Old political parties were breaking up and men were taking sides on the basis of issues of crucial significance for the future of a democratic America. The stirring call of "free soil, free labor, free land, and free men" was soon to be the battle cry of freedom.

The labor movement which Sylvis entered at this time was still numerically small and it was, in fact, scarcely audible as an organized force in the great social struggle. Since the introduction of machinery and the employment of men and women in workshops and factories in America, workingmen had recognized the need to form trade unions,



to act together in defense of their common interests. In the decade of the 'twenties and 'thirties, their unions became the focal points for independent political action and the backbone of the great democratic movements of the period. They had succeeded in extending suffrage, obtaining free public education, reducing working hours, and obtaining the legal limitation of hours of work on public works to ten a day, by order of President Martin Van Buren in 1836. They had succeeded in defeating the conspiracy laws aimed at destruction of the trade unions and had protected the rights of workingmen to organize and to strike. They had raised the cry for free public lands for actual settlers which became a dominant issue, in the 'forties, among workingmen influenced by the land reformers and by the prevailing anti-monopoly sentiment.

In party politics, too, they had played an important role. In the previous decades, Jacksonian democracy owed a large measure of its strength to the support of the workingmen of the Northeast. "There can scarcely be any doubt," says Richard T. Ely, an economist, writing of the period, "that the Democratic Party from 1829 to 1841 was more truly a workingmen's party than had been the case with any other great political party in our country or with that party either before or since."<sup>3</sup> Later, as the Democratic Party fell under the domination of Southern leaders, large sections of the workingmen followed those who championed free land and abolition of slavery into the Liberty Party and then into the Party of Free Soil Democracy in 1848 under the platform of maintaining the "rights of free labor against the aggression of the slave power and to secure free soil to a free people."<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately these parties merged with the Republican Party. The Democratic Party, however, continued to exert influence over the laboring masses.

As the anti-slavery struggle approached its climax, the agitation for the distribution of free land to actual settlers and for the abolition of slavery became more directly linked. George Henry Evans, leading land reformer, who had the ear of the organized workingmen, was now finally persuaded that the support of artisans, mechanics, and factory workers for Homestead legislation could be assured only by advocating abolition of slavery. He reversed his previous stand and favored the abolition of both chattel and wage slavery. Abolitionists like Wendell Phillips voiced the fears of many workingmen that free labor in the North could never preserve and extend its freedom unless slavery was abolished.\* Fear of land monopoly and the domination of a landed aristocracy was wide-

\* Supporters of the slave power were attempting to justify slavery by propagandizing that there was no essential difference between slavery and free labor. The following quotation from the writings of a Southern publicist expressed this view: "What is the essential character of *Slavery*, and in what does it differ from the *servitude* of other countries? If I should venture on a definition, I should say that where a man is compelled to labor at the will of another, and to give him much the greater portion of the product of his labor, there *Slavery* exists; and it is immaterial by what sort of compulsion the will of the laborer is subdued. It is what no human being would do without some sort of compulsion. He cannot be compelled to labor by blows. No, but what difference does it make, if you can inflict any other sort of torture which will be equally effectual in subduing the will? if you can starve him, or alarm him for the subsistence of himself or his family? And is it not under this compulsion that the *freeman* labors?" (James D. B. De Bow, *Industrial Resources of the Southern and Western States*, Vol. II, p. 223. New Orleans, 1852.)

spread. There were some who were concerned about the fact that if the expansion of slavery continued, the future of free public lands would be imperiled. To them, a nation of small farmers was the barrier to a slave system of agriculture. The anti-monopoly sentiment of the workingmen and the farmers of the Jacksonian days had not visibly changed. Free land, free enterprise and equal opportunity for widespread ownership of industry were the core and essence of this sentiment. No special group was to be permitted to usurp the privileges and rights granted to all under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The slave power was consolidating its opposition to free land for settlers, while Homestead legislation to grant land to actual settlers out of the public domain was the promise of the new coalition in the Republican Party.

The trade unions of the decades prior to the Civil War did not become rooted and did not maintain their continuous existence as stable workingmen's organizations. Vast unsettled lands and a rising industrialism offered opportunities for varied types of employment, for ownership of tools and of farms.

The labor population was fluctuating from workshop to farm, from journeyman to master and back again to journeyman. Periods of crises and depression with consequent severe unemployment depleted the workingmen's organizations and left them without funds and members. But in the decade of the 'fifties, industry and mechanization spread to new regions and means of communication were facilitated by the development of railroads. Increasing specialization was creating a sharper separation between journeyman and employer. As a result, new knotty prob-

lems presented themselves to the wage earners and once again they resorted to trade union organization and action to protect their economic interests. A founder of the machinists' and blacksmiths' union noted in 1859 the changes in their conditions of employment, which had impelled them to establish a national organization, and emphasized that authority of the owners was now being delegated to the superintendents and foremen, and men and masters were becoming estranged.<sup>5</sup>

Encroachments on wages, longer hours, the breakdown of wage levels through unregulated apprenticeship were immediate threats which endangered the economic interests of the workingmen and compelled them to strengthen their unions. The establishment of trade unions became the primary objective of workers of the 'fifties, and all other questions, although not ignored, were secondary.

The movement for free land to actual settlers, led by land reformers many of whom were themselves skilled workmen, continued to claim labor support. To them the opportunity for free land was not merely an avenue of escape; it was a weapon against uncontrolled exploitation.<sup>6</sup> But the trade unions which took on new life in the 'fifties did not agitate for Homestead legislation as labor organizations had previously, nor did they oppose it.

The anti-slavery issue was also reaching a head. Terence V. Powderly, later leader of the Knights of Labor, wrote of the attitude of the workingmen towards this question:

"The white mechanic felt that only a change of conditions were necessary to place him in the same category with the colored man. No wonder then that the desire to secure freedom for all the inhabitants of the United States



began to grow among the members of labor organizations, and gave them renewed zeal in the work of emancipation. The right to live, the right to work, and the liberty to work for home and family instead of for a master is inherent in man, but the mechanic could not feel secure in that right while the slave owner had it in his power to hold one portion of mankind in serfdom the most degrading and brutalizing.

"The anti-slavery agitation and the organization of the mechanics of the United States kept pace with each other; both were revolutionary in their character, and though the agitations differed in methods, the ends in view were the same, *viz*: the freedom of the man who worked."<sup>7</sup>

### Founding the National Molders Union

Early in the decade of the 'fifties, local unions of journeymen printers met to form a national association to protect their wages against competitive conditions, and in 1854 the hat finishers organized a national federation. Soon after, the spinners, the iron puddlers and the blacksmiths and machinists organized on a national scale. During the crisis of 1857 and in the period of unemployment in the wake of the crisis, the iron molders, like other skilled craftsmen, faced lowered wages and the return of "odious rules." \* Iron works were still largely under individual

\* "Molders were compelled to buy rammers, shovels, sieves, dust bags, bellows, in fact everything they used except sand flasks and patterns. Many were required to pay weekly rent for their floor room. Yearly contracts were introduced and to enforce the agreement one-third of their wages was retained until the end of the year. If the shop operated only nine months, molders fearing to go else-

ownership, but the crisis had intensified the trend towards specialization, and centralization and new methods and machines were making possible the use of semi-skilled workmen at lower pay. Mutual protection and defense of their economic interests demanded closer co-operation of the local unions through national organization.

In this movement Sylvis came to the fore. His organizing ability was an important factor in effecting national unity. As recording secretary of the strongest local, Sylvis was in communication with most of the seventeen scattered molders' unions. Isolated as they were and financially weak, it had been easy to defeat them in strikes. The Philadelphia union had succeeded in maintaining wages through the crisis period but it was now being realized that national organization was necessary to equalize working conditions throughout the country and thereby to avert a general breakdown of wage levels.

Acting on a proposal by Sylvis, a committee of the Philadelphia molders' local of which he was secretary addressed a letter to all locals in December, 1858, on the advisability of holding a national convention. On June 15, on assurance of a favorable response, a call was issued for a national convention to be held on July 5, 1859, signed by Isaac A. Sheppard as president and Sylvis as recording secretary. Seven years later Sylvis commented on the inexperience of the thirty-five delegates from twelve local

where to work had to remain idle. Store pay was the rule and cash pay the exception..." (H. E. Hoaglund, "Early Organizations of the Iron Molders," *International Molders Journal*, Nov. 1911, Vol. XLVII, pp. 8-21.)

unions who gathered together at the first national convention of molders:

"When the first convention of iron molders met in Philadelphia, July 5, 1859, for the purpose of consultation and general organization, no definite plan was formed or could be formed of the results which such a union of hearts and union of hands could bring about. Nor was it possible to divine what the great objects of such an organization should be. A grating wrong existed, which it was necessary to remove and all felt the necessity of action. . . . All that could be done at that time, however, was to interchange views and make the most of such crude ideas as could be gathered from a free expression of opinion, based upon the experience of those who felt the evils we sought to redress. No settled policy was decided upon beyond the simple fact that the convention adjourned to meet again in six months.

"A start was made and men began to think for the first time in their lives. Reflection developed new ideas and these ideas soon began to assume definite form."<sup>8</sup>

The delegates set up a loose national federation with only advisory functions. Sylvis and a committee of molders were appointed to prepare an address to the iron molders of the United States. This address, written by Sylvis, stressed the growing impoverishment of the "laboring classes" and pointed to the power of numbers.

"What position are we as mechanics to hold in society?" it asked. "Are we to receive an equivalent for our labor sufficient to maintain us in comparative independence and respectability to procure the means with which to educate our children and qualify them to play their part in the world's drama; or must we be forced to bow the suppliant

knee to wealth and earn by unprofitable toil a life too void of solace to confirm the very chains that bind us to our doom? . . . In union there is strength and in the formation of a national organization, embracing every molder in the country, a union founded upon a basis broad as the land in which we live, lies our only hope. Single-handed we can accomplish nothing, but united there is no power of wrong that we cannot openly defy."<sup>9</sup>

The object of the new body was declared to be "to place ourselves on a foundation sufficiently strong to secure us from further encroachments and to elevate the moral, social, and intellectual condition of every molder in the country."<sup>10</sup> The address, embodied in the constitution of the National Union as its preamble and adopted at the next convention of the iron molders in 1860, was later used by other unions as a model.

The national union of molders was first convened when strikes were in progress in Albany, Providence, and Portchester to restore the 1857 scale of wages and to regulate the apprenticeship system. The successful conduct of these strikes became the principal concern of the new organization. Immediate practical steps were taken to aid the strike in Albany which had been in process for three months and a resolution declared that "the cause of the molders in Albany is the cause of our craft at large." When the second convention was called in 1860, in Albany, the national body had succeeded through financial and moral support in winning the Albany strike and had gained considerable prestige among the molders and greater confidence in its own power.

It was at this convention, on motion by Sylvis that the



convention "does now resolve itself into a national union," that the National Union of Iron Molders was officially launched. Through Sylvis' active participation and leadership, the union proceeded to work out a system of financing itself and of consolidating its gains. Although he was nominated for president at the convention, Sylvis was not elected to that office in 1860 but was instead chosen as the union's national treasurer.

By the time of the third convention in Cincinnati in 1861, on the eve of the Civil War, the national union had already forty-four affiliated local bodies. So impressive were the results of this rapid growth that the Cincinnati press called the union the "largest mechanical association in the world."<sup>11</sup> Over \$6,000 had been raised during the year by the union through voluntary assessments of which more than \$5,000 had gone directly to the aid of strikes. But demands from striking locals had depleted the local treasuries and calls for assistance were too numerous for adequate help. The convention decided on a compulsory tax on the members. Fears arose over the ability of the national union to survive and a note of caution crept into the proceedings. It was agreed that strikes were to be "discountenanced until every other remedy had been tried and failed."<sup>12</sup> Action in the convention also indicates that the members of the Iron Molders Union were among the first to raise the question of an eight-hour day.

The molders' convention of 1861 was a test of Sylvis' steadfastness. A group of molders sought to oust him from office by discrediting him as treasurer of the union on the grounds of misuse of funds. There appears to have been no justification for this attack but Sylvis had evi-

dently antagonized a group in the local union by his persistent and devoted interest in national organization and his use of funds for this purpose. The group in opposition held the narrow view that the weaker locals would be a financial drain on the strongest, the Philadelphia, local, and thus a national union would be a hindrance rather than an aid to the local's advance.

This group succeeded in preventing Sylvis from participating as a delegate in the convention, but he attended as an officer of the National Union. Although he was denied the right to vote or hold office by the ruling of the presiding officer, he reported on the state of finances and defended himself vigorously against his accusers. He participated actively in the proceedings and his great organizing ability contributed in a fundamental way to the solution of the problems before the union. His appointment as a member of the committee to revise the constitution excited considerable opposition but even attacks on his personal integrity did not swerve him from his devotion to the advancement of the union.

## II. THE CIVIL WAR YEARS

The Iron Molders Union, so promising at the outset, did not meet in 1862. Its progress was interrupted by the Civil War. After the election of Lincoln, the country teetered on the brink of war. Even before his inauguration, seven Southern states had seceded. Industry and trade were paralyzed by the uncertainties of the situation and thousands of workingmen were thrown out of employment. Leading newspapers, reflecting the outlook of the Whig elements in the Republican Party, called for conciliation with the secessionists. The banking and commercial classes of the North who feared loss of trade and investments in the South inspired demands for compromise in the press. The *New York Herald*, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the country, expressed the dominant pro-slavery appeasement sentiments of the Democratic Party and opposed any "coercion of the South."

The cry of "preserve the Union" raised by the coalition forces of the Republican Party became the cry of a large section of labor. Many workingmen, influenced by prevailing press opinion, hoped to avert war by compromise with the South.

Sylvis' position at this time reflected the confusions of a period in which political realignments and social changes were taking place with great rapidity. Like many skilled mechanics, his party ties had been with the Democratic Party. He had voted for Lincoln's opponent,

## THE CIVIL WAR YEARS

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Stephen Douglas, candidate of the Northern Democrats in the elections of 1860. The country was still sharply divided after Lincoln's election; fear of war was widespread. As events were hurtling towards a climax, Sylvis wanted to avoid conflict but he was staunch in his belief that the Union must be preserved intact, at any cost. At a time when even the most conscious forces within the Republican Party were indecisive and wavering on the crucial issues before them, Sylvis, too, failed to understand clearly the course of events. The trade union movement itself was neither a significant force numerically, nor was it a sufficiently strong factor in influencing national affairs.

Sylvis' mistaken and futile hope that further compromises with the South might avert war and yet preserve the union led him to join his fellow-molders in an effort to call a national peace convention of mechanics and laborers. At a meeting initiated by the molders in the border state of Kentucky held at Louisville on December 28, 1860, Sylvis participated in the preparations for nationwide meetings of workingmen and became a member of the Committee of Thirty-Four which was set up for this purpose. The resolution adopted at the meeting declared that "workmen without distinction of party believe that our national prosperity and hopes of happiness depend on the perpetuity of the Union" and urged "the resignation of those among their representatives at Washington who, ultra and sectional men, are now above their actions imperiling the safety of the Union."<sup>13</sup>

The Committee of Thirty-Four issued a call to labor for a national convention on February 22 in Philadelphia. This paralleled a similar move by Democrats supporting a



policy of conciliation with the South, who gathered in Washington early in February at a peace convention. The Democrats met in the hope of influencing Lincoln's policies and did not finally adjourn until the President's inaugural.<sup>14</sup> The workingmen's anti-war convention was held as scheduled on Washington's birthday and Sylvis was one of its leading participants. But the workingmen failed to respond to efforts at conciliation, for by this time the secession of South Carolina and five other states had aroused them to demand drastic action by the government to curb the slave power.

Sylvis at this time was unable to differentiate between the ill-defined objectives of the Republican Party leaders, which held out the hope of the destruction of slavery, and the policies of compromise pursued by Democratic Party leaders, which gave strength and comfort to the pro-slavery forces. Addressing the workingmen in a letter published in *Mechanic's Own*, a Philadelphia labor paper, Sylvis showed his distrust of the political leaders of the country, which was later to form the basis for his decision to support the formation of a labor party. He wrote:

"Under the leadership of political demagogues and traitors scattered all over the land, North, South, East and West, the country is going to the devil as fast as it can, and unless the masses rise up in their might and teach their representatives what to do, the good old ship will go to pieces."<sup>15</sup>

Large sections of labor, whether Democratic or Republican by party affiliation, adhered to Lincoln and the promises held forth by the new Republican administration. This was especially true of the foreign-born workers whose

aspirations for freedom had brought them to American shores. The German workingmen who had emigrated to the United States after the Revolution of 1848, and had brought with them the democratic ideas generated by this social upheaval, constituted a significant section of the radical anti-slavery forces. They had aided in the formation of the Republican Party and had thrown their strength into the election of its standard bearer. The anti-slavery cause was greatly strengthened by the activities of the German-American Communist leaders, Joseph Weydemeyer,\* Adolph Douai,† and others who had participated in the struggles abroad and who were close followers of Karl Marx. Since the early 'fifties they had devoted their efforts to organizing the German workers into trade unions and agitating for abolition of slavery.

On Lincoln's journey to Washington for his inauguration, he was met at his hotel in Cincinnati by a delegation from the German Workingmen's Society which numbered two thousand members. Fred Oberkleine, workingmen's leader, delivered an address to Lincoln in which he declared:

\* Weydemeyer was editor of a German labor periodical, *Die Neue Zeit*, at the time of his death in 1866. He had previously edited *Die Revolution* in 1852 and *Die Reform* in 1853 in which he printed for the first time the famous *Eighteenth Brumaire* by Karl Marx. His publication in 1853 of the *Workingmen's National Advocate* was dedicated to the purpose of organizing and uniting all workingmen into a national trade union.

† Douai established an Abolitionist newspaper in Texas, called the *San Antonio Zeitung*. Compelled to leave Texas for this activity, he moved to New York where he became among the first to popularize Marxist teachings. He became editor of the *Arbeiter Union*, a German language newspaper in New York, and later editor of several Socialist Labor Party publications.

"We, the German free workingmen of Cincinnati, avail ourselves of this opportunity to assure you, our chosen Chief Magistrate, of our sincere and heartfelt regard. You earned our votes as the champion of free labor and free homesteads. Our vanquished opponents have in recent times made frequent use of the term workingmen and workingmen's meetings in order to create the impression that the mass of workingmen were in favor of compromises between the interests of free labor and slave labor. . . . We firmly adhere to the principle which directed our votes in your favor."<sup>16</sup>

Expressing the hope that the President would be faithful to the platform on which he was elected, he said: "If to this end you should be in need of men, the German free workingmen with others will rise as one man at your call ready to risk their lives in the effort to maintain the victory already won by freedom over slavery." Lincoln expressed concurrence with these sentiments and commented that "the workingmen are the basis of all governments for the plain reason that they are the most numerous. . . ." <sup>17</sup>

As Sylvis observed the policies of the two parties, he was steadily becoming "suspicious of the doctrines of both as they were being interpreted by their recognized and trusted exponents and chose between them only as between two evils."<sup>18</sup>

In March, 1861, he wrote of the activity of the Committee of Thirty-Four, which continued to maintain correspondence with its members and hold meetings, as follows:

"The business of this committee is to perfect and perpetuate an organization among the industrial classes of the city and state for the purpose of placing in positions

of public trust men of known honesty and ability; men who know the real wants of the people and who will represent us according to our wishes; men who have not made politics a trade, men who for a consideration will not become tools of rotten corporations and aristocratic monopolies; men who will devote their time and energies to the making of good laws and direct their administration in such a way as will best subserve the interests of the whole people."<sup>19</sup> The beginnings of Sylvis' future interest in independent political action by labor was here clearly manifest.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, the working people, white and Negro, gave unstintingly to the war on the battle front, and in the rear by the production of food, clothing, and the materials of war. At the first call to arms, workingmen enlisted and gave unqualified support to the North in the struggle. The trade unions practically ceased functioning. Many unions resolved to adjourn for the duration and enrolled in the army in a body. The workingmen formed the core of the Northern forces. Among the active recruiting officers was Joseph Weydemeyer, who enlisted and received a commission as a captain from the border state, Missouri, which from the first had been a storm center of civil strife between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces. He recruited a regiment of German-American workers. Weydemeyer later rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel.

Sylvis promptly recruited a company but, on the plea of his wife, did not himself join immediately, although he was offered a commission as first lieutenant. Several months later, however, while working at his trade in Philadelphia,



he organized a militia company of molders. When the invasion of Pennsylvania was imminent and the mayor of Philadelphia issued a call for troops, the molders' company was the first to offer its services. Sylvis served as orderly sergeant for a few months. Upon his release, he returned to Philadelphia, where he found that the situation facing labor at home demanded immediate steps to revive the trade unions to defend their interests.

The first year of the war was a period of intense hardship for those who remained behind the lines. The country had hardly recovered from the crisis of 1857 when it was again plunged into a depression in 1861. Fear of war had impeded industrial activity. Businesses were bankrupt and in 1861, as the war approached, twice as many had closed their doors as in the previous year. Banks crashed and state bank notes which flooded the country were rapidly depreciating in value. Unemployment was widespread and at the same time great numbers of new immigrants were increasing the labor supply.

With the first signs of industrial activity, stimulated by the need for war materials, leaders like Sylvis and Jonathan Fincher, who was secretary of the Machinists and Blacksmiths Union, were determined to rebuild their trade unions. Throughout the country, towards the end of 1862, local unions, trade assemblies, and national organizations were beginning to appear. The miners organized a national association in 1861 and in the following year the Sons of Vulcan, a union of iron puddlers, was revived. In 1863, the Brotherhood of the Foot Board, later known as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, was organized.

The Philadelphia local of the molders, the only local in the trade which had survived the storm, had engaged in a long and bitter strike throughout the first year of the war to prevent the employers from destroying the union. Sylvis, at first practically single-handed, resolved to gather together the forces of the molders and reorganize the national union.

The rapid turn of events called for this objective. As the country became more deeply involved in war, new issues presented themselves to challenge the workingmen. Industry which had been insufficiently developed to meet the needs of a war situation was being transformed. In the temporary boom which the war had brought, new processes and techniques had come into use, and with astonishing speed the shift from workshop to factory was taking place. There was emerging a highly mechanized industrial system with large-scale production. Owners of factories, railroads, mines, and communications were consolidating their control with unprecedented tempo. The trend towards concentration of ownership was apparent everywhere. Because the government was desperately seeking to fulfill its war needs, it was willing to purchase at any price. In the name of patriotism, commission men, manufacturers, merchants, and contractors gouged the government of fabulous sums in return for which they supplied inferior materials and goods. A recent historian describes the transactions of the period as follows:

"Aged, blind, spavined, and ringboned nags constituted the vast bulk of a delivery of cavalry horses. For sugar the government sometimes received in considerable part sand, for coffee, rye or some worse substitute, for leather a

paperlike substitute; for muskets and pistols the refuse of shops and of foreign armories and in certain cases even condemned arms previously disposed of to the contractors who resold them."<sup>20</sup>

### A New Economic Power

Enormous wealth was accumulated by selling "shoddy" clothing and blankets for the armed forces, a material which looked like cloth but was a composition made of "refuse stuff and sweepings of the shop." Through such unscrupulous dealings, an aristocracy of wealth emerged to replace the old slavocracy.

As the war progressed a cry arose against persons in high places who were using their offices to fleece the government while millions were giving their lives on the battlefields.

"Worse than traitors in arms are the men who, pretending loyalty to the flag, feast and fatten on the misfortunes of the nation,"<sup>21</sup> read a report of a special committee appointed by Congress to investigate the conduct of the war.

There was more than ample cause for this indignation. Thurlow Weed, an influential Republican, entrusted with a diplomatic mission by the State Department, received a 5 per cent commission on a contract he negotiated for the War Department with a powder manufacturer. Secretary of the Navy Welles gave his brother-in-law a commission for buying ships for the Navy which netted the latter \$90,000 in five months. Secretary of War Cameron figured in a scandal in which J. Pierpont Morgan de-

frauded the government. More than seven hundred Hall's carbines which had been originally sold as condemned property by the government at \$2 apiece, were repurchased for the government by the War Department's agent, John Stevens, for \$15 each. They were again condemned and sold at \$3.50. Morgan then advanced \$17,486 to Stevens to repurchase the carbines, which had now been slightly repaired, at \$12.50 apiece and resell them to the government at \$22 each. This netted Morgan the sum of \$109,912. The carbines were still so defective that they would shoot off the thumbs of soldiers using them. The House of Representatives was therefore opposed to paying Morgan. But he demanded that his claim be paid and when questioned at a Congressional hearing he refused to disclose the terms of the deal. This profitable transaction helped to lay the foundation of the Morgan fortune.<sup>22</sup>

General James Wilson wrote that "in tents, a lighter cloth or a few inches off size; in harness, split leather; in saddles, inferior materials and workmanship; in shoes, paper soles; in clothes, shoddy; in mixed horse feed, chaff and a large proportion of the cheaper grain; in hay, straws and weeds; in fuel, inferior grades of coal and wood, and so on through the entire list nearly every article presented its chances for... dishonest profit.

"Every contractor had to be watched... and quartermasters and inspectors frequently stood in for a share of the profits."<sup>23</sup> At least 20 per cent and perhaps 25 per cent of government expenditures for war needs was tainted with fraud, a special investigator of the War Department reported.



The luxury and extravagance of the rich who were untouched by the ravages of war, since they could be released from service in the army by paying for substitutes, was in marked contrast to the suffering and devoted self-sacrifice of the people. The Copperhead Democrats who abetted the Southern slave power by determined opposition to the war effort could, therefore, successfully stir up the bloody anti-draft riots of July, 1863, among the people of New York. They knew well how to exploit for their own ends the deep indignation and resentment of the people against the profiteers in patriotism.

To finance its purchases and meet the costs of war the government undertook to float bond issues rather than to resort to the policy of heavy taxation of the people as proposed by the banks. The banks had refused to pay in coin in December, 1861, and the country seemed headed for a period of inflation which could only result in impoverishment of the masses. During 1862 and thereafter, the government, through acts of Congress, issued a total of six hundred million dollars in paper money or "greenbacks." To encourage the sale of government bonds, interest was made payable in coin, and bonds purchasable in greenbacks were made redeemable in gold.\* This set in motion frenzied speculation as government bonds were bought up with depreciating greenbacks by financiers and speculators, and gold was at a premium.

\* Thaddeus Stevens, Radical Republican leader, opposed this course and urged that interest on new loans be paid in paper money. This demand was later taken up by Sylvis and the money reformers who saw a panacea for society in a change in the currency system.

The Republican Party in power soon made good its promise to the manufacturers of a high tariff which protected American goods against foreign competition, but this proved no safeguard to the workingmen against high prices and low wages. It had finally adopted legislation providing 160 acres of land per settler by the Homestead Act of 1862, but lavish grants by the Federal government and the states to speculators, to railroads and to other corporations soon nullified this seemingly generous measure. No precautions had been taken to prevent land monopoly as the land reformers and labor and the farmers had urgently demanded. Labor's interests had not been safeguarded. The best lands were already passing into large holdings and were becoming inaccessible to the settlers for whom they were supposed to have been kept. Less than two months following the passage of the Homestead Act, Congress authorized a grant of twenty-three and a half million acres to private corporations ostensibly to defray costs of railroad expansion but actually establishing a land monopoly and the basis for increased land speculation. Ten years later nearly half the land area set aside for actual settlers had been granted to corporations.<sup>24</sup> In the exploitation for private gain of the abundant, rich natural resources which these lands provided lay the basis for the economic and political power which the dominant class of merchants, land owners, manufacturers, and financiers were soon to possess.

Small businessmen felt increasingly insecure, and as mechanization increased in agriculture, the farmers, too, felt the threat of competition from the new large-scale

farms. A clamor of indignation was heard against the "money power" of Wall Street and against the land, railroad, and other monopolies, which found increasing response from these groups and other sections of the middle class affected adversely by the changes in method of production and the trend toward corporate control. The decline of the purchasing power of the dollar was a grievance of large sections of the population. Money reformers and land reformers who voiced middle class anti-monopolist sentiment were soon propagandizing for legislation to reform the currency system.\* This they offered as the permanent cure for the hardships concomitant with the new industrial developments. They sought, as heretofore, to gain the support of the workmen for their program, and their influence tended to divert labor from the main path of strengthening its economic organizations and from coping with a rising capitalism through class action. Sylvis, too, was eventually to yield to this influence.

Labor faced a new economic power which was frustrating its cherished hopes. In spite of intense cut-throat competition, employers were finding a common ground of unity against the workmen and were seeking to take advantage of their organizational weakness and their lim-

\* The currency reformers took over the monetary ideas of Edward Kellogg, an American reformer of the 1840's, known as the "father of Greenbackism." With some modifications these views became the doctrines of the so-called labor reformers and were endorsed in the 1867 convention of the National Labor Union. They contained many points of similarity with the views of Proudhon, contemporary French social reformer.

ited experience to impose more repressive measures upon them.\*

As the needs of war gave a spurt to industry and trade, employment increased but wages were correspondingly reduced as paper money depreciated and prices for food, clothing, and rent rose with unprecedented speed. Wage increases which came in the wake of trade union struggle could hardly keep abreast of price rises. Over the period of the war, prices doubled and workmen were compelled to economize, lower their living standards, and make other sacrifices. By 1864, trade magazines were admitting that consumption of staple products by the masses of the people, such as coffee and sugar, had declined to the point where trade was almost stagnant.<sup>25</sup>

### Revival of the Iron Molders International Union

In this social situation, Sylvis, who now recognized that the interests of capital and labor were in conflict, determined to re-establish the national molders union to protect

\* Anthony Trollope, English novelist, on a visit to America during the Civil War remarked: "There is, I think, no taskmaster over free labor so exacting as an American. He knows nothing of hours and seems to have that idea of a man which a lady has of a horse. . . . I had fancied that an American citizen would not submit to be driven, that the spirit of the country, if not the spirit of the individual, would have made it impossible. . . . But I found that such driving did exist. . . . But there is worse even than this. . . . The complaint that wages are held back and not even ultimately paid is very common. . . . The men over them are new as masters, masters who are rough themselves, who have themselves been roughly driven" . . . (Anthony Trollope, *North America, Visit During the Civil War* [1861], p. 136, Philadelphia, 1862.)



the economic interests of the men of his craft. This involved the reorganization of the local unions and the reconstitution of the national body which had ceased to function. Through the initiative of Sylvis, the scattered union members from different parts of the country met at a national convention in January, 1863, in Pittsburgh. The convention, attended by twenty delegates from fourteen locals, as its first act elected Sylvis as national president, a position which he retained until his death in 1869.

Under Sylvis' leadership, the convention proceeded to revise the constitution to suit the needs of the new situation. The national union was reshaped into a centralized organization with greater and more clearly defined powers than heretofore, and it now took the name, Iron Molders International Union. The authority of the national body was established as the "supreme head" with the subordinate local unions governed by it. Local union constitutions, which had varied widely and were often in conflict, were now to conform to that of the national union and by-laws were to be framed by local unions subject to approval of the national union. This marked an advance over the previous loosely organized federation of autonomous local unions. To establish the union on a sound basis, Sylvis aided in devising a system of finances to include annual membership dues and funds from sale of union cards and charters.

His wisdom in recognizing the importance of stable organization led him to conclude that the national union would be limited in its functions and could never properly

administer the union's affairs nor serve the interests of the membership unless a national treasury was established with a special strike fund by means of compulsory per capita taxation. He saw that dependable financial resources were a guarantee of the ability of the national union to combat the employers' associations more effectively and created the possibility for victory in strikes. Although he was already deeply engrossed in larger social issues, he was equally far-sighted about the practical details of organization which would insure the future stability and effectiveness of the organization.

This was unprecedented in the experience of American trade unions for no union had previously concerned itself with setting up a tightly knit, carefully planned national organization with a system of finances. Sylvis directed every detail of organization with a clarity and purpose that has rightly entitled him to be designated as America's first labor organizer.

After the convention, Sylvis gave up work at his trade and devoted himself exclusively to the building of the national union, with no promise of pay and with consequent severe hardship for him and his family.

Having received "flattering responses" from a number of locals regarding a proposal of the National Union to send out an organizer, Sylvis persuaded the Philadelphia local to advance him \$100 for organizing purposes and he then set forth on a "tour of experiment." He acknowledged that he had "no very clear perceptions of the extent of the task . . . or of the means by which it was to be accomplished."<sup>26</sup> No funds were yet available and it had

been left optional with the locals as to whether they would raise the funds for the trip.

Within a year Sylvis had organized eighteen new unions, reorganized sixteen locals which had entirely disappeared after 1861, and had placed twelve other old locals on a firmer basis. To accomplish this feat, he traveled ten thousand miles, through every section of the country and in Canada. When he was unable to raise funds he tramped from place to place, begging rides when he had insufficient funds to pay for them. It is said that "he wore clothes until they became quite threadbare and he could wear them no longer . . . the shawl he wore to the day of his death . . . was filled with little holes burned there by the splashing of molten iron from the ladles of molders in strange cities, whom he was beseeching to organize."<sup>27</sup> Of the total sum of \$899 which he collected on his tour during the year, he sent \$279 to his family, which was their only income.

When he was re-elected president at the Buffalo convention in 1864, he was voted an annual salary of \$600 which was increased at subsequent conventions to a maximum of \$1,600. The union grew steadily and the membership increased from 2,000 in fifteen local unions in 1863, representing eight states, to 6,000 in 54 locals from eighteen states, the District of Columbia, and Canada in 1865. From a total income of \$1,600 in 1863, the union's revenues had risen to \$20,000 in 1865. "Out of all the charters issued since the commencement of my administration two years ago," Sylvis reported, "but one has been returned; showing a degree of prosperity and stability unequalled in the history of any similar organization on the continent." His confidence in the future of

the Iron Molders International Union was emphatic at this convention: "The union once shaken to its very center, with column after column falling in ruins around us, has been relieved of surrounding dangers."<sup>28</sup> By the time of his death in 1869 the union reported a membership embracing 90 per cent of the molders and totaled ten thousand.

Through his experiences in the trade unions and his independent study, Sylvis had by this time concluded that labor must assume its place in society as a basic force in the creation of a true democracy. Implicit in his thoughts was his faith in the workingman and the need for developing the pride and confidence of labor in its own dignity. He saw the need to unite labor for its economic interests but he also visualized how labor could utilize its power as an articulate force in the life of the nation. He declared that "Labor is the great fountain from which they [governments] draw all support and acquire a vital power. Upon labor is founded all enterprise, progress and the perfection of everything that renders a nation great and prosperous."<sup>29</sup>

Sylvis argued forcefully against the prevailing contentions that there was an identity of interest between capital and labor. He declared to the contrary that there were basic antagonisms. His unequivocal presentation of his position deserves quotation at length as a vital document of American labor history:

"The fact that capital denies to labor the right to regulate its own affairs, would take from the workingman the right to place a valuation upon his own labor, destroys at once the theory of an identity of interests; if as is held



by them, the interests of the two are identical, and their positions and relations mutual, there would be no interference whatever with one another; the workingman would be left free to place his own price upon his labor as capitalists are to say what interest or profits they shall have upon money invested. . . . Capitalists employ labor for the amount of profit realized and workingmen labor for the amount of wages received. . . . This is the only relation existing between them; they are two distinct elements, or rather two distinct classes, with interests as widely separated as the poles. We find capitalists ever watchful of their interests—ever ready to make everything bend to their desires. Then why should not laborers be equally watchful of their interests—equally ready to take advantage of every circumstance to secure good wages and social elevation? . . .

"If workingmen and capitalists are equal co-partners, composing one vast firm by which the industry of the world is carried on and controlled, why do they not share equally in the profits? Why does capital take to itself the whole loaf, while labor is left to gather up the crumbs? Why does capital roll in luxury and wealth, while labor is left to eke out a miserable existence in poverty and want? Are these the evidences of an identity of interests, of mutual relations, of equal partnership? No sir. On the contrary they are evidences of an antagonism. This antagonism is the general origin of all 'strikes.' Labor has always the same complaints to make, and capital always the same oppressive rules to make and powers to employ. Were it not for this antagonism, labor would often escape the penalty of much misery and moral degradation, and

capital the disgrace and ruin consequent upon such dangerous collisions. There is not only a never-ending conflict between the two classes, but capital is in all cases the aggressor. Labor is always found on the defensive, because:

"Capital enjoys individual power and in the exercise of that is given to encroach upon the rights and privileges of labor.

"Labor is individually weak and only becomes powerful when banded together for self-defence. . . .

"Capital knows no other commercial principle than that . . . which says 'buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest' but which if applied to labor means 'keep down the price of labor and starve the workingmen.' . . . It must follow from the admission of these premises, that the interests of employer and employee are not identical. That, on the one side, employers are interested because of profits to keep down the price of labor while on the other side the employees are justified, on account of self-interest, to keep up wages. Thus labor and capital are antagonistic. . . .

"If there is mutuality and oneness of feeling, I ask, sir, what means this universal uprising of the workingmen of this continent who are rushing together as with the power of the whirlwind, towards one common center—a union of workingmen?"<sup>20</sup>

Profound discontent with administration policies was apparent everywhere among the people despite their expressed loyalty to the Northern cause in the Civil War. Resentment, shown by strikes, protest meetings, and petitions, was directed against the government policy of

benefiting employers while ignoring labor's needs and especially against the subsidies, land grants, and franchises which were laying the basis for the growth of powerful monopolies.\* Workingmen saw in the importation of contract labor, legalized by an Act of Congress in 1864, collusion to counteract the effect of trade union organization.† Added threats to wage standards presented themselves in the increasing numbers of women and Negroes who were entering the labor market and were being employed at lower wages. Rapidly soaring prices made wage increases imperative. Such a situation could only be met by concerted action through organization. Strikes were being waged throughout the country and were being followed by trade union organization. Carl Sandburg defines the character of this movement:

"As if by instinct and with no tradition nor practice for guidance, the working class began using the weapon termed the strike. The very word 'strike' was so novel that some newspapers put it in quotes as though it were slang or colloquial, not yet fully accepted in good language."<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the years 1863 and 1864 more strikes occurred than had yet been seen in all the previous years in

\* In Illinois large mass meetings of the people prevented the granting of a franchise for 99 years to a Chicago street car line. (See E. D. Fite, *Industrial Conditions in the North During the Civil War*, p. 180, New York, 1910.)

† The St. Louis local of the Molders Union struck in 1864 to prevent an employer from using workingmen imported from Prussia to break down union wage rates. The latter who were met on arrival by union men agreed to join the strikers after learning of the situation and were supported by funds from the International Union for several months. Protests from the labor movement finally succeeded in having the contract labor law rescinded at the end of the decade.

American history. The *Springfield Republican* of March 26, 1863, remarked that "the workmen of almost every branch of trade have had their strikes within the last few months. . . . In almost every instance the demands of the employed have been acceded to. The strikes which have all been conducted very quietly . . . have led to the formation of numerous leagues or unions."

### The Right to Strike

As the strike movement progressed everywhere during the Civil War, the employers developed new methods to destroy workingmen's organizations and to break strikes. National associations to combat labor were being organized from scattered local employers' groups. Certificates of honorable discharge were demanded before a man was hired. Effective blacklists were established. Bills were introduced in New York and Massachusetts designed to make union organization illegal by imposing drastic penalties against any attempts to organize, designating them as acts of "intimidation." Both bills failed of passage as a result of aggressive demonstrations and outraged protests by the workingmen. Responding to pressure of the employers, army leaders forbade strikes in arms plants and placed strike leaders under military arrest. General Order No. 65, issued by Major General William Rosecrans in April, 1864, from the St. Louis headquarters in Missouri, expressly forbade any attempts to organize men engaged in the production of war materials and provided military protection for scabs, and a blacklist for those who engaged in organizing work. This was followed by a similar



order from General Burbridge of Louisville headquarters.

Printers in St. Louis, when faced with soldiers sent by General Rosecrans to break their strike, appealed to President Lincoln for assistance. They recalled to him his famous utterance in reference to a shoe workers' strike in Lynn, Massachusetts, in which he said, "Thank God, we have a system where there can be a strike." Lincoln is said to have sent word that "servants of the Federal government should not interfere with the legitimate demands of labor." The strike-breaking soldiers were then withdrawn.

Generally, however, Lincoln chose to be silent on these struggles and on the actions of his generals, for his first concern was for the uninterrupted and successful conduct of the war. It is known that in one instance at least he suggested to army and navy heads that they settle a shipyard's strike by bargaining with labor.<sup>32</sup>

Sylvis unhesitatingly condemned the army's action in opposing organization and breaking strikes. He criticized especially the arrest and imprisonment without trial of four of the workers of the R. P. Parrott Gun Works in New York who struck for wage increases. Sylvis denounced sharply the procedure in which three of the strikers "confined in a prison for no offence other than exercising their right to refuse to work at a less price than they were pleased to ask—a right belonging to every American citizen—were not permitted to return to their homes, were driven from their abiding places, exiled in a free land, their families forced from the town, forced to move beyond the limit of this tyrant's domain whose rule is as absolute as that of the Emperor of all the Russias."<sup>33</sup>

There were other instances in which the army was used against strikers who sought to improve their wages to meet rising prices at a time when profiteers, in the name of patriotism, were exploiting the government and the people. Striking machinists and tailors were forced back to work at the point of a bayonet in St. Louis and their strikes were broken by arrests of several members. General Thomas in Tennessee had arrested two hundred striking mechanics and "deported" them north of the Ohio River. When the engineers on the Reading Railroad struck, the United States military manned the roads. The Miners' Association was broken up by government interference in the Eastern coalfields. The back pay of molders who struck for wage advances in the Brooklyn Navy Yard was confiscated. Soldiers stood guard over strikebreakers during a strike of New York dockworkers.

Sylvis, loyal to the government in the Civil War, placed responsibility not upon the government policy at Washington but on the "petty tyrants clothed in a little brief authority [who] have been retained in the positions they have disgraced." The assaults upon labor he attributed to men in political office, who "for a price made themselves the willing instruments of a few pampered menials who sought to steal away the rights of the people." He also held as responsible employers whose relations to labor he characterized as that of "master and slave and totally at variance with the spirit of the institutions of a free people." He pointed with pride to the loyalty and heroic sacrifice of the workingmen in the Civil War whom he characterized as the "bone and muscle of the nation, the very pillars of our temple of liberty."

"While armed treason and rebellion threatened our institutions with destruction, while the proud and opulent of the land were plotting the downfall of our government the toiling millions stood like a wall of adamant between . . . the country and all its foes." <sup>34</sup>

For this reason he considered the outrages practiced against the people the more reprehensible and stood out courageously against those who charged him with bringing about a conflict between labor and capital.

"A collision between capital and labor already exists," he wrote in 1865. "At present it is only a clashing of interests, a social revolution, a war of classes with such weapons as fair argument, honesty of purpose, a true regard for the best interests of society. . . . If the doctrines and principles promulgated and taught by the advocates of union among workingmen and the efforts of those engaged in this movement to secure to labor the fruit of its toil, and the full enjoyment of all the blessings of an enlightened civilization, will produce such collision, let it come." <sup>35</sup>

He warned those whom he believed were trying to frighten labor into submission that "we are terribly in earnest and that sooner than turn back from the point we have reached and the course we have marked out, we will accept the fearful issue. To us this question is something more, something dearer, than constitutional ties or church relations or country itself and the sooner those who are . . . attempting to destroy our organizations come to understand our true feelings, and what we mean, the better it will be for all concerned." <sup>36</sup>

That the struggles of labor might even take on the pro-

portions of a mass revolt was apparent to Sylvis who spoke with intense class feeling about the social upheavals abroad and their meaning to American labor. If the rights of the working people continued to be trampled under foot, he predicted, they might resort to revolutionary action to rid themselves of their domestic traitors just as the anger of the people abroad had finally burst forth into an "irresistible explosion."

"In ordinary times," he declared, "a collision would have been inevitable; nothing but the patient patriotism of the people and their desire in no way to embarrass the government prevented it. But 'there is a point where forbearance ceases to be a virtue'—that point may be reached." <sup>37</sup>

In organization of the workers, Sylvis saw the immediate hope of the working people and the realization of their aspirations. "The capitalists are denying us the right to organize," he declared eloquently, "out of fear of their own loss of power.

"Capitalists and the professional robbers of the hard earnings of the toiling millions, political and professional demagogues and other drones upon society, have been so long used to lording it over the poor man; so long used to molding us in their own fashion and making of us the stepping stones to their wealth, ease and elevation that any effort by us to shake off this power that has been 'grinding us to the dust of misery' threatening . . . not only ourselves but our posterity for all time to come is looked upon by them as dangerous to the best interests of society. They see in this great formation the ultimate destruction of their power over the people; they see the transparent



sophistry fabricated by them to deceive the masses penetrated, and that unless the movement can be crushed in its infancy, their power will have departed. This explains the holy horror and the flow of pious rhetoric with which they of late cajole the 'dear people' and cry out against the immoral tendencies of trade-unions. I believe that all men are 'endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights' among which is the divine right to labor, the right to an interest in the soil, the right to free homes, the right to limit the hours of toil to suit our physical capacities, the right to place a valuation upon our own labor proportionate to our social and corporeal wants, the right to the first social position in the land, the right to a voice in the councils of the nation, the right to control and direct legislation for the good of the majority, the right to compel the drones of society to seek useful employment . . . and the right to adopt whatever means we please within the pale of reason and law to secure these rights."<sup>38</sup>

Sylvis urged trade union organization as the primary way to achieve a fuller and richer life for the workingmen, the first step towards competence and independence. He believed that labor was "not sufficiently educated to properly understand the principles of social and political science and too apt to listen to the teachings of those whose interest it is to foster prejudice" because long hours and low wages provided little opportunity for them to read, study and reflect. "We want more time and more money," he declared, "fewer hours of toil and more wages for what we do. These wants we will supply and these evils we will remedy through the instrumentality of our organizations."<sup>39</sup>

Pointing with pride to the gains made by labor through trade union organization he said:

"The benefits secured by *our* union aside from an increase in wages are beyond calculation. A strong desire for mental cultivation has infused itself throughout the entire body. Schools, libraries, reading and lecture rooms and other institutions for the diffusion of useful knowledge are springing up among us . . . a feeling of brotherhood everywhere exists; an interest in each other's welfare has broken down to a vast extent that selfishness that used to exist among us; a feeling of manly independence has taken the place of that cringing and crawling spirit that used to make us the scorn of honest men."<sup>40</sup>

### The Labor Press

To the labor leaders of this period, an independent labor press had become indispensable. The press of even the most progressive sections of the middle class had become increasingly hostile to labor's right to organize and to strike, and to the demands put forward by the workingmen.\* Sylvis urged support for *Fincher's Trades' Review*, a general labor newspaper which appeared in 1863 under the editorship of Jonathan Fincher with whom he was then working closely in union organization. He deplored

\*In labor disputes, for example, the *Nation*, which formerly sought labor as an ally in the Abolitionist struggle, was now consistently on the side of capital. It opposed the eight-hour day movement, denied labor's right to negotiate wage scales; it urged profit-sharing and co-operatives as a means of harmonizing the growing class conflict.

the lack of support for the paper by the machinists and by other unions and urged the molders to circulate and subscribe to it. Warning that even labor papers might come under the domination of labor's enemies, if not adequately supported and controlled by labor, he said: "It is depressing to our cause when newspapers professing to be labor organs lend themselves to either one of the political parties. . . ." He urged the workingmen to free these papers of the temptation to seek support elsewhere:

"Keep them distinct and sanction no entangling alliances calculated to awaken distrust and suspicion. We must hold our cause spotless and pure . . . and those who attempt to carry water on both shoulders, that is, to serve two masters, cannot bring essential aid to either. He that is not for us is against us and we want no partial advocates of the labor movement, no half-way support."<sup>41</sup>

An independent labor press he considered absolutely indispensable to the success of the labor movement.

"If that paper [*Fincher's Trades' Review*] is allowed to fail," he wrote, "we do not deserve to succeed. It ever has been and is now a terror to the aristocracy. Let it fail and one universal howl will go up from one end of the continent to the other."<sup>42</sup>

He wanted a similar medium of education and agitation for the molders' union and had proposed as early as 1860 that a union journal be published. When he was elected president of the National Union, one of his first acts was to obtain consent of the membership for a monthly publication. The Molders International Union thus became the first national union to issue its own journal. Other trade

unions soon followed this example.\* In 1866 it was reported that 54,000 copies of the *Molders' Journal* had circulated throughout the country from the time of its inception. Of the influence of the labor press on public opinion, Sylvis said: "Not until their advent did we make the slightest advance towards equalizing wages with the cost of living nor would our best efforts to establish the eight-hour law or to accomplish any other reform have availed us anything without their aid."

When Sylvis attempted, however, to broaden the scope of the *Molders' Journal* to that of a labor newspaper, he was unable to break down the narrow viewpoint of his fellow members who wanted a journal devoted exclusively to the interests of the molders. Sylvis edited the journal until 1868, when, due to opposition among the molders, he discontinued it. In 1868, when Sylvis' interests had extended into fields beyond the more immediate trade union questions, he became co-editor of the *Workingmen's Advocate* with A. C. Cameron, a printer. This weekly newspaper which had started publication in Chicago in 1866 was strongly anti-monopolist in sentiment, supported currency reforms and the eight-hour movement. Sylvis wrote editorials and articles for the paper, encouraged its circulation and used it as an agency of propaganda for trade union organization and for reforms. The *Workingmen's Advocate* became the official organ of the National Labor Union in 1868.

\* The combined labor press had an estimated annual circulation of twenty thousand during the Civil War.



### III. THE EMERGENCE OF THE NATIONAL LABOR UNION

With the termination of the war in 1865, the return of about two million soldiers to peace time pursuits and the cessation of demands by the government for war needs brought a new crisis and new problems for labor. Sylvis records that "there was a prostration of our trade unparalleled within the recollection of the oldest among us." The war had closed with prices advanced 100 per cent over the 1860 level, while wage increases had averaged only 50 per cent. The molders, in a somewhat more favorable position than other workers, had reported a wage increase of 56 per cent over 1860 at the 1866 convention. The International Union was now firmly established with 111 locals in 22 states and over 7,000 members. Attempts by the employers during the spring of 1865 to provoke a general strike had been successfully checked. Sylvis noted that special precautions had to be taken to prevent such a move and that only a few strikes were authorized by the national union.\* Most of the strikes were successful in resisting wage reductions and in making further advances and Sylvis could report that "our ship rode through the storm in safety."

\* In 1863, at the suggestion of Sylvis, the constitution of the union had been revised to require local unions to present a bill of grievances before a strike could be sanctioned. Authorization of strikes was given and assessments were levied only after a majority of the locals had approved. Further restrictions on strikes were imposed in 1865.

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But the years of post-war depression and unemployment, 1866-1867, bore heavily on the molders. The union was in grave danger of annihilation by a concerted drive of foundry employers who had finally joined forces on a national scale. Wage cuts were declared simultaneously in most of the important centers and workingmen were locked out when they refused to accept them. The great lock-out of 1866 which spread from Albany and Troy westward involved ten local unions, and disaster was averted only when the employers' solid front was broken. A strike in Pittsburgh, involving five thousand men, continued for an entire year. That a formidable but unsuccessful attempt to destroy the union had been made was indicated by Sylvis when he said:

"They [the employers] confidently expected that such an array of business talent and vast wealth together with a flourishing of trumpets and the aid of almost the entire newspaper press of the country would so alarm us that the Molders International Union would disappear like mist before the rising sun. But unlike the Iron Founders Association the members of the International Molders Union were not to be bought with gold, scared by a loud noise nor whipped with the traces of falsehood and wilful misrepresentations of the most corrupt newspapers on the face of the earth."<sup>43</sup>

The workingmen had fought with some success to maintain their right to organize and through their unions had won increases in wages to meet sharply rising prices. Now that the demobilized soldiers and the Negro freedmen were seeking jobs, labor became more insistent in its demands for the eight-hour day. Karl Marx, writing from

England as a close observer of American events and a potent influence over British working class sentiment in favor of the North during the Civil War, noted that agitation for the eight-hour day was the "first fruit of the Civil War."

"In the United States of America," he wrote, "any sort of independent labor movement was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new and vigorous life sprang. The first fruit of the Civil War was an agitation for the eight-hour day—a movement which ran with express speed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California."<sup>44</sup>

### The Eight-Hour Movement

As early as 1860, the national conventions of the Machinists and Blacksmiths Union and the Molders Union had initiated the eight-hour demand. With funds granted by the machinists and blacksmiths and the Boston Trades Assembly in 1863, and through the efforts of Ira Steward,\* a Boston machinist, state and local eight-hour day leagues

\* Frederick Sorge, Socialist leader and close follower of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, remarks of Ira Steward that "it is almost exclusively due to his work that the representatives of Massachusetts in the highest councils of the nation, such as Charles Sumner, Henry Wilson, and General Bank, supported the workers' demands for a number of years." (Frederick Sorge, "Die Arbeiterbewegung in den Vereinigten Staaten," *Neue Zeit*, Vol. IX, No. 39, 1890-91, p. 398.)

were organized in many sections of the country to agitate for legislative protection against long hours of work. Steward together with Wendell Phillips, a close co-worker, established the Labor Reform Association in Boston which became a center of eight-hour agitation. Eight-hour leagues with a membership from the working and middle classes were formed as far west as San Francisco and local unions in many places took up the struggle for an eight-hour day in their strike demands.

Agitation for the eight-hour day aroused the ire of labor's erstwhile allies in the anti-slavery and land reform movements. The men who had formerly appealed for labor's support were now impatient with the workingmen's demands and were backing the interests of the rising class of entrepreneurs and financiers. While they conceded the need for more leisure for labor, they argued that in the long run it would mean diminished production, less earnings and therefore less wealth for all. They proposed instead that labor turn its attention to arbitrating its differences with capital and seek its objectives through profit-sharing and co-operation, by legislative changes in the monetary system, and by protection of the public domain.<sup>45</sup> Abolitionists like Wendell Phillips, who saw the need for class action through strong trade unions, were exceptional.

As a convinced supporter of the eight-hour day movement, Sylvis told the molders in convention in 1864 that workingmen were justified in their efforts to bring about a shorter working day. He contended that "the ignorance of the masses was the direct and inevitable result of overwork" and concluded that "to diminish the hours of toil is



to increase the value of labor, is to multiply the number of laborers, is to add to the moral dignity and religious spirit of the times, is to change for the better the social state and the character of the people, and this will be to strengthen the patriotism, the commercial credit, the political institutions of the country."<sup>46</sup>

At this time he urged an educational campaign for the reduction of the working day. In the following year he proposed to the molders that the first step towards the ultimate establishment of the eight-hour system was to refuse to report for work before 7.00 a.m. The eight-hour day demand he considered as labor's right to benefit from increased production and the material gains concomitant with the extensive use of machinery. The worker, he declared, runs all the risks of life, limb and health from the use of machinery, which adds to wealth, while his wages remain the same and he works as hard and as long. "The worker alone," he wrote, "is made to suffer a social martyrdom to benefit every class of society save that in which he moves."<sup>47</sup>

### Efforts at Federation

The eight-hour question was soon to be the slogan around which the labor forces were to rally and unite their strength. From the time when Sylvis had sought to unite workingmen on a national scale in an effort to avert war, he had recognized that labor's future rested on its ability to act as a decisive political force in national affairs. This he realized could not be achieved without first organizing labor nationally in every branch of industry. Although he

had gained his knowledge of trade unionism principally from his experiences in pioneering in the leadership of a craft union, he did not reflect the narrow craft viewpoints of many of the skilled workers of his day. This is noted in the characterization of him in the official weekly periodical of the Woman's Suffrage Association, *The Revolution*, edited by Susan B. Anthony, leader of the woman's rights movement. Sylvis is described as a "prominent leader of the labor reform movement which already counts hundreds of local associations...and which will ere long shape the policy of the nation." Praising Sylvis' knowledge of "the labor reform question" and the conditions of the working class, the paper comments:

"He saw in this country this difference; a government of the people of whom the laboring classes constitute the greater and most important part and according to the theory of government should be the controlling element. Here, then, the laboring classes have a duty to perform somewhat different. It is theirs to *preserve* what the laboring classes of Europe may vainly struggle for years, against kings and nobles and standing armies, to *gain*. . . . Himself a workingman, one of the people, as he learned from history the universal tendency of all centralized government to class legislation and unequal taxation, taken from the laboring many to enrich the non-producing few, naturally adopted the Jeffersonian doctrine of a strict construction of the Constitution. . . ."<sup>48</sup>

Sylvis' recognition of the power of trade union organization led him to encourage the formation of central trade bodies or trades assemblies and of new national unions, and finally to initiate a national federation of all

trades and workingmen's organizations for the united action of labor. He was one of the active organizers, and, together with Fincher, served as a trustee of the Philadelphia Trades Assembly which was established in 1864 and which soon became the strongest trades assembly in the country. When a movement was on foot to organize a national trades assembly during the same year, he endorsed it before the molders' convention as well worthy of consideration and appointed a committee of three to aid in its formation. This initial effort by the Louisville central body to unite the trades assemblies into a national body brought together twelve delegates from eight trade assemblies in September, 1864, in Louisville. The International Industrial Assembly of North America was formed on that occasion and voiced a demand for the eight-hour day and for increased organization. The International Assembly did not reconvene again, for lack of support. While favoring united action, Sylvis did not attend the meeting nor were there any representatives present from the Philadelphia Trades Assembly. The national unions were yet too weak, too few, and too preoccupied with their own struggles for survival to take any active part in the new development. This national body of central trades was soon to be replaced by the National Labor Union, based on representation and leadership from the national trade unions, a form better suited to the needs and interests of the new, growing national organizations. At different times Sylvis had had consultations and considerable correspondence with other prominent trade unionists and reformers on the subject of organizing a national federation. In 1866 the national federation was finally to be achieved with the

foremost issue of the time, the eight-hour day as its basic demand.

In February, 1866, along with William Harding, president of the International Coachmakers Union, Sylvis planned the preliminaries of the first congress of the National Labor Union. Among the initiators of the first congress there was no agreement as to the amount of power or the nature of the control that it would be wise or safe to rest in the proposed organization. There was consensus, however, on the issue of the eight-hour day and a section of the call to the congress read:

"The agitation of the question of eight hours as a day's labor has assumed an importance requiring concerted and harmonious action *upon all matters appertaining to the inauguration of labor reforms*. It is essential that a National Congress be held to form a basis upon which we may harmoniously and concertedly move in its prosecution."

### The First Congress

Sylvis was unable to be present at the congress when it met on August 20, 1866, in Baltimore, due to illness, but he watched its proceedings with deep interest. The congress was attended by seventy-seven delegates from thirteen states, most of whom came from the local unions where the strength of the labor movement still lay. Only two national unions, the coachmakers' union and the curriers' union, were officially recorded as sending delegates, but indicative of the leadership of the new national unions in a federation of labor is the fact that ten dele-



gates were officers of national unions.\* A flag to welcome the delegates, flown outside the meeting hall, hailed the solidarity of labor with the words, "Welcome to the Sons of Toil, from the North, South, East, and West."

The eight-hour day issue occupied by far the greater part of the deliberations of the first congress of the National Labor Union. Out of the debate over this issue arose the question of undertaking independent political action and the repudiation of the two old parties. Delegate Edward Schlegel † of the German Workingmen's Association of Chicago aroused the congress with a vigorous speech calling for the immediate formation of a new party of labor:

"A new party of the people," he declared, "must be in the minority when it first comes into action. But what of that? Time and perseverance will give us victory; and

\* The national unions were still small in number and strategically in a weak position. The following were organized during the decade of the 'sixties: American Miners' Ass'n., 1861; Sons of Vulcan, 1862; Locomotive Engineers, 1863; Cigar Makers, Ship Carpenters, Plasterers, and Carriers, 1864; Carpenters, Bricklayers, Painters, Tailors, Heaters, Coachmakers, 1865; Silk and Fur Hat Finishers, 1866; Spinners, 1867; Knights of St. Crispin (shoeworkers), 1868; Railroad Conductors, Wool Hat Finishers, Daughters of St. Crispin, and Morocco Dressers, 1869. These were in addition to the four International Unions organized in the 'fifties which revived after the first years of the Civil War: the Blacksmiths and Machinists, the Molders, the Typographical Union and the Hat Finishers.

† Schlegel is sometimes referred to as Schleger. Sorge points out that he was influenced by Joseph Weydemeyer and Herman Myer, early American Marxists. The German Workingmen's Association of Chicago which Schlegel represented became part of the American section of the International Workingmen's Association. (Fredrick Sorge, *op. cit.*, pp. 439-40.)

if we are not willing to sacrifice time and employ perseverance, we are not deserving of victory. It is useless to hold conventions, if we fear so greatly to touch the prejudices of others. A new labor party *must* be formed composed of the elements of American labor. . . . The Free Soil Party originated with a few thousand voters; but if it had not been formed, Lincoln would never have been elected President of the United States."<sup>49</sup>

After vigorous debate during which there was considerable opposition expressed by those who regarded politics as outside the legitimate field of trade union activity, the congress finally resolved that "the first and grand desideratum of the hour is the adoption of a law whereby eight hours shall constitute a legal day's work in every state of the American Union and we, the representatives of the workingmen of America in congress assembled, recommend that steps be taken to form the same [a national labor party] which shall be put in operation as soon as possible."<sup>50</sup> No specific steps leading to action were outlined, however.

Other questions dealt with in the resolutions of the congress reflected current panaceas to harmonize the conflict between capital and labor but occupied little of the attention of the delegates. Throughout the deliberations of the congress, free land, paper money, and the national debt were linked together.<sup>51</sup> Co-operation was recognized as a "sure and lasting remedy for the abuses of the present industrial system" and unions were urged to set up co-operative workshops.

The congress failed to take an independent stand on the problems arising out of Reconstruction in the South. Un-

able fully to grasp the significance, for labor as a whole, of the great social struggle of the Negro people in the South for land and democracy, the labor delegates saw only the immediate need for "a speedy restoration of the South" and for the establishment of normal relations after four years of war and sacrifice. In their resolution they followed President Johnson who aimed to come to terms with the Southern planters and defeat the efforts of the Radical Republicans in Congress, whose program for the destruction of the political power of the former slaveholders of the South gave aid and hope to the struggle of the Negro people for freedom. While they gave formal support to Johnson's program, the trade unionists, still politically inarticulate, remained aloof from the bitter political struggle which raged between the Radicals and their opposing forces.\*

Primary attention was given to trade union problems which overshadowed all other questions at the congress. A forceful resolution urged the organization of all workers into existing unions, the formation of unions where none existed, and the establishment of trades assemblies and national organizations. It advocated more rigid enforcement of the apprenticeship system, the boycott of goods made by convict labor unless wages paid were as much as that paid to outside mechanics, support of "sewing-women and daughters of toil," better housing for the people, the distribution of more land to actual settlers,

\* For a fuller discussion, see James S. Allen, *Reconstruction, The Battle for Democracy*, New York, 1937; also, Manuel Gottlieb, "Struggle for Land During Reconstruction," *Science and Society*, Vol. III, 1939, pp. 356-88.

and the establishment of workingmen's lyceums, institutes and reading rooms. Support of the labor press was urged.\* As for strikes, it recommended that every honorable means be exhausted before such a course be resorted to, but where there was no other alternative, it urged unity for a successful result. A suggestion that "arbitration" committees be appointed by each trades assembly for the settlement of all disputes was not favorably received and was not included in the resolution finally adopted.

Following the congress, a delegation called on President Johnson to present the demands of the National Labor Union on the eight-hour day, on convict labor, and on public lands. Johnson expressed sympathy with the stand of the congress on convict labor and on public lands and cited his record.† But he was evasive on the eight-hour issue which he said government and labor "could consider and settle as they went along."<sup>52</sup>

In the *Molders' Journal* for September, Sylvis commented editorially on the first congress of the National Labor Union. He hailed it as a great success and expressed agreement with the principles set forth in its resolution. He dissented from the views of such trade unionists as Fincher, who regarded independent political action as outside the province of trade unionism and who

\* Special mention was made of the *Workingmen's Advocate* of Chicago, the *Daily and Weekly Voice* of Boston, the *Daily Union* of Detroit, the *Molders International Journal* of Philadelphia, the *Herald* of Troy, the *Industrial Advocate* of St. Louis, and the *German Reform* of Chicago as deserving the support and patronage of workingmen in those localities.

† Johnson had introduced a Homestead Bill in Congress in the 'fifties and supported the passage of the law in 1862.



were therefore opposed to the direction the congress had taken. As an organizer Sylvis was critical, also, of the failure of the congress to establish the machinery for its proper functioning. The failure to present a constitution and rules he regarded as a "sin of omission," and held that such a procedure would have given "character and importance to the movement." This weakness in the plan of organization he characterized in the following colorful terms:

"The fact is the convention met, held a five days' session, built a splendid railroad track, placed upon it a locomotive complete in all its parts; provided an engineer and numerous assistants, placed them upon the footboard, told them to go ahead and then suddenly adjourned without providing wood and water to get up steam; and there the whole machine will stand until the third Monday in August, 1867, when it is hoped that there will be such a coming together of workingmen as will astonish the oldest inhabitant and that the work so nobly begun at Baltimore will be completed."<sup>53</sup>

### Sylvis and the Labor Party

At the time of the anti-war movement, before the Civil War, Sylvis had already indicated doubt and dissatisfaction with "political demagogues and traitors" and showed contempt for the practices of the politicians of both parties. During the war he had learned to be increasingly suspicious of both parties in their relations to labor. When the molders were on strike in Philadelphia in 1863, the *North American*, a Philadelphia newspaper, had sought to discredit and break the strike by falsely claiming that

the molders were highly paid because they had obtained a 50 per cent increase in wages. The owner of the *North American*, Morton McMichael, ran for mayor of Philadelphia in 1864 on the Republican ticket and Sylvis determined to mobilize Philadelphia's labor vote to defeat him. At a mass meeting of which he was chairman, resolutions were adopted urging labor "to vote against any man of any party who is now or ever has been an enemy to workingmen." During the campaign Sylvis repeated: "I will vote and work against any man of any party who opposes the labor movement; and I consider it the duty of every workingman to do the same."<sup>54</sup>

Two years later Sylvis referred again to the need for labor representation in government at a mass meeting of an eight-hour league in Chicago, at which six thousand people were present. Cameron who presided reported that Sylvis had shown "in a masterly manner that the legislation of the past had been the work of the capitalist and that the legislation of the future, in order to accomplish the desired result, must be the product of representative men from the labor ranks."<sup>55</sup>

Following the congress of the National Labor Union, Sylvis publicly declared that labor must build its own party and that he had no hope of improving labor's position through the two existing parties. Convinced that he could win the support of the workingman behind such a party, he said:

"We have tried the balance-power or make-weight expedient of questioning candidates, and throwing our votes in favor of such as indorsed or were pledged to our interests. How vain and futile this expedient has proven is

known to all. It is but a history of broken promises and violated pledges and invariably ends in exposing our weakness; for say what you will, men of opposite opinions to the candidates will not trust him in the face of such frequent deceptions. This and other considerations have convinced us that if we resort to political action at all, we must keep clear of entangling alliances. With a distinct workingman's party in the field, there can be no distrust, no want of confidence. When it becomes a fixed fact that workingmen can vote for men *of* them and *with* them, the incentive will be sufficient to unite the masses in one grand struggle for victory. We should then know *for whom* and *for what* we voted. Every toiler would feel that he held his destiny in his own hands." <sup>56</sup>

In the presidential campaign of 1867, Sylvis' name was put forward by labor papers and other periodicals as a possible vice-presidential candidate on an independent ticket with Congressman S. F. Cary, of Ohio, a supporter of the eight-hour movement and of money reform. He was also mentioned as a running mate on the Democratic ticket with George H. Pendleton, a currency reformer, and on the Republican ticket with Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury in the Lincoln cabinet. Sylvis, however, never showed any interest in a political career for himself, and never sought a political office.

In reviewing the issues of the National Labor Union congress before the molders' convention in 1867, Sylvis stressed especially the importance of using the established instruments of democracy to prevent a repetition of Old World tyranny and oppression. He warned that "the helpless condition of the vast majority of the producing

classes in Europe and Asia, while it excites our warmest sympathy, should admonish us to guard our rights with greater vigilance, lest we suffer encroachments to steal upon us imperceptibly, that we may find ourselves bound hand and foot, helpless for resistance." <sup>57</sup>

Taking his examples from the struggles of the workingmen abroad, he pointed to the fact that there the "rich are made richer and the poor poorer. Wealth is continually drifting into the hands of a few, the lands are monopolized by the nobility, and all laws are framed to maintain this condition of things, because the victims of this exclusive monopoly are disfranchised, the rich make laws to protect themselves and the poor have no remedy." <sup>58</sup> Sylvis castigated the gold gamblers, money brokers and speculators, and the coal and iron capitalists, and indicated again his hostility to the oppressing classes:

"I need not tell you, gentlemen, with what aptness the capitalists of America imitate those abroad. It is a continual struggle to reach the same standard of exclusiveness, to exercise the same tyranny and to confine our privileges to the same limits. Here where our institutions give better means of defence, it requires greater tact and shrewdness on the part of capital to accomplish the results; hence we find it more prolific in expedients, more untiring in its efforts. . . .

"Society is never safe when such proscriptions are tolerated. Here is the fountain, the sacred fountain of all revolutions, all strikes, all flour riots, or 'bread or blood' demonstrations which so frequently darken the annals of the world; this is the point to which the producing classes have been depressed and at which they now rebel, claiming



their rights and resolving to attain them. There is a point beyond endurance to which men may be driven, let their veneration for the law be what it may. . . ." <sup>59</sup>

Independent political action he urged as an immediate necessity so that labor could have a voice in federal and state legislation: "We can make laws and repeal laws. We possess the power because we have the numbers to annul any oppressive act emanating from state or national legislation. We can *compel* our rulers to be just or supplant them by men from our own ranks whose sympathies and interests are identical with our own." <sup>60</sup> He chided the workers for being too long indifferent to the "means of defence afforded by the institutions of the land," and declared his conviction that the workers would gradually break the ties which bound them hand and foot to the old political parties!

"Yet it too often happens that we lack the moral courage to sever our political associations, and thousands of workingmen will suffer themselves to be used as hobbies upon whose shoulders aspiring demagogues ride themselves into power and place. . . . Let me ask you today to point out a single benefit that you have derived from your years of devotion to any particular party. Not one of them ever put a loaf on your table, a pair of boots upon your feet, or a coat upon your back. All of them stand out in bold relief as the proscriptive agents that never fail to close the door of promotion to us all. The rich are promoted, the poor are excluded. Why? Because our system of conducting elections has become so corrupt that none but the rich possess the means to purchase power and position. . . .

"If the theory of our government is the greatest good for the greatest number why shall we not put it into practice? This government was made for the people, and we are the people, but thus far we have proved ourselves unequal to the task of self-government, because we bear the chains of party. . . . We are slaves not because we *must* be, but because we *will* be. . . . From year to year workingmen are wheedled and cajoled into supporting partisan favorites who dare not hazard a renomination by any act of political heterodoxy which might 'injure the party.' Even if a measure favorable to the interests of labor is introduced, there is too often a secret understanding by which other members dovetail amendments to it that render it useless or offensive. . . . Then let us rise in the majesty of our strength and resolve to rule instead of being ruled; assert our rights instead of begging for them, and occupy that proud position which a republican form of government secures to majorities." <sup>61</sup>

The political activity of the National Labor Union, nevertheless, was confined largely to obtaining promises of support for eight-hour laws from candidates of the old parties. Eight-hour bills were introduced in a number of states and in Congress, and when the National Labor Union met again, it was possible for the legislative committee to report that six states had passed eight-hour laws and that a bill had passed the lower House of Congress and was pending in the Senate, providing an eight-hour day for government employees. The state laws, however, were described as "frauds on the laboring classes" <sup>62</sup> for they had not been enforced. The working class was as yet too

inexperienced politically and too weak to make secure the benefits of such a victory.

### The Second Congress

The changing social scene heightened the importance of the second congress of the National Labor Union, held in Chicago, in August, 1867. Delegates from sixty-four organizations attended, the majority of whom were from trade unions, but representation was not confined to the trade unions alone. Six representatives were present from farmers' societies and nine from eight-hour leagues. The government had ceased the issuance of greenbacks and was in fact contracting the currency. Unemployment affected large sections of the population. The farmers were feeling the effects of low prices for their crops. Antimonopoly sentiment among the farmers in the Middle West was expressed through the formation of farm associations and eight-hour leagues. The beginning of an alliance of workers and farmers was in process. Inflationary money schemes were gaining ground among those who were hoping to keep America a nation of small owners. At the same time these ideas deflected labor from the pursuit of its class interests. Currency reforms and co-operation now dominated the thoughts of leaders of the National Labor Union, and Sylvis, too, was giving more attention to these questions than hitherto.

Sylvis took an active part in the deliberations of the second congress. He helped to draw up a constitution of the organization and served as chairman of the Committee on Public Lands and Agriculture. It is said that he

"barely escaped" election as president of the National Labor Union. Frederick Sorge remarks that the strong opposition of the trade union delegates to the money question which Sylvis now supported was sufficient to prevent his election.<sup>63</sup>

The Chicago meeting again endorsed the resolutions adopted in 1866, but added the demand for "a just monetary system" and issued this platform as its Declaration of Principles. The paramount issues before labor were still the eight-hour question, independent political action, and the problems of Negro, woman, and immigrant labor. Once again workingmen were advised to elect men to office from the ranks of labor whose primary object would be to enact an eight-hour law. Organization of unions was recommended, and the system of co-operation was to be investigated by a committee to which Sylvis was elected.

A resolution on public lands proposed by Sylvis expressed fear for the growth of a landed aristocracy and that the public domain meant for the people would soon be entirely inaccessible to the workingman. Previously he had condemned the government's action in selling 800,000 acres of Cherokee lands to a speculative ring known as the American Emigrant Company which was organized by men, some of whom occupied high places in government, for the purpose of inducing foreign workingmen to emigrate.\* He had discerned the motives behind this ven-

\* The American Emigrant Company, also referred to as the Emigrant Aid Society, was incorporated for \$1,000,000 in 1863. In 1864 it received support of the Federal government under the contract labor law passed by Congress. The law was repealed in 1868 after tremendous mass pressure.



ture and denounced it as "one of the remedies for strikes proposed by our oppressors." The whole transaction was condemned by him as "another scheme to legislate the land from under the feet of the masses and to render them more dependent by closing every avenue of relief from the thralldom of monopolists." He expressed the workingmen's hope of escape in the following words:

"Capital feels unsafe in waging a war against labor so long as workingmen have access to land. The object is to get possession of it and thus cut off all retreat. There is still hope for the toiler... while he can stand upon a portion of God's footstool and call it his own."<sup>64</sup>

His proposal to the National Labor Union convention, which was adopted, recommended that government appropriate twenty-five million dollars to aid in establishing a general eight-hour day, to grant free lands to actual settlers among the unemployed and for the general benefit of labor "without distinction of sex, color, or locality."

## IV. PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

### Organization of Negro Workers

An address to the workingmen issued by the National Labor Union just prior to the Chicago convention in 1867 embodied the resolutions of the first congress and spoke of labor's abiding interest in the question of Negro labor. It conveyed the message that it was labor's concern to be interested in the status of the Negro as a workingman and especially in the part the Negro was to take in advancing labor's cause. A twofold fear was expressed: namely, that employers would use Negro labor as strike-breakers and that as citizens and voters Negroes might be turned against labor's interests.

"Negroes," the address declared, "are four million strong and a greater proportion of them labor with their hands than can be counted from among the same number of any other people on earth. Can we afford to reject their proffered co-operation and make them enemies? By committing such an act of folly we would inflict greater injury upon the cause of labor reform than the combined efforts of capital could accomplish.... So capitalists North and South would foment discord between the whites and blacks and hurl one against the other as interest and occasion might require to maintain their ascendancy and continue the reign of oppression."<sup>65</sup>

The address approached the question with caution, out of fear that the adherents of the National Labor Union

would not be unanimous on the question but stated that it could not avoid the issue, and advocated unity of Negro and white.

"What is wanted," it urged, "is for every union to help inculcate the grand ennobling idea that the interests of labor are one; that there should be no distinction of race or nationality; no classification of Jew or Gentile, Christian or infidel; that there is one dividing line, that which separates mankind into two great classes, the class that labors and the class that lives by others' labor."<sup>66</sup>

The Negro question was vigorously debated at the 1867 Congress in Chicago, when the Committee on Negro Labor proposed deferment of the question until the next convention on the ground that it "involved so much mystery and upon it [there was] so wide a diversity of opinion among our members." Sylvis opposed deferment and declared that Negro labor had already become an issue, that white workers were already striking against black workers and that unless labor was united the trade union movement would be destroyed and Negroes would cast their votes against labor. The delegates finally evaded a decision on the question and it was laid over until the next convention on the ground that the principles already adopted made no further action on the subject necessary.

Sylvis, however, adhered strictly to the recommendations of the address which proposed the formation of trade unions, eight-hour leagues, and other labor organizations among the Negro people and also invited them to participate in the "general labor undertaking." He was consistent in demanding that white and Negro workingmen unite, that Negroes be organized into the trade unions,

and that equal pay for equal work prevail. But he did not indicate at any time that he was sympathetic to the struggle of the Negro people in the South for land, education, and democracy or that he understood its meaning for the labor movement as a whole. On several occasions he was critical of the Radical Republican program and denounced government expenditures for the Freedmen's Bureau because the needs of the workingmen were being ignored and no similar assistance was being extended to labor by the government. The Freedmen's Bureau he characterized as a "huge swindle upon the honest workingmen of the country" and called for its closing. As for the South, he was satisfied merely to demand the immediate restoration of its economy.

Sylvis appears to have been unable to break down the prejudices which were prevalent among the skilled workingmen of his craft against the admission of Negro members into the union and into the industry. He frequently called the attention of the membership to the serious effect on wage levels resulting from the employment of non-union Negro molders. In the molders' convention in 1867, he supported a resolution which gave the locals the right to decide on the admission of Negro members, but action on the question was postponed indefinitely.<sup>67</sup> Through the columns of the *Workingmen's Advocate*, too, Sylvis and Cameron both urged equality for the Negro in politics and industry. Rebuking the coopers' union for the refusal of its members to work with a Negro, the paper remarked editorially:

"Political equality means that the Negro race shall have an equal voice with the Caucasian in shaping the destiny



and future legislation of this country. Yet strange to say the privilege of competing with him in the race of life as equals is denied him. . . . The line of demarcation is between the robbers and the robbed, no matter whether the wronged be the friendless widow, the skilled white mechanic or the ignorant black. Capital is no respecter of persons and it is in the very nature of things a sheer impossibility to degrade one class of laborers without degrading all. To make labor dignified, therefore, we must dignify the laborer no matter what his calling or social position."<sup>68</sup>

The Declaration of Principles, which was reaffirmed at the National Labor Union convention in 1868, referred again to the question of Negro labor but evaded a decision. It declared unequivocally that both political parties were dominated by the "non-producing classes," that these depended on public plunder for their wealth and have no sympathy for the working millions beyond the use they make of them for their own aggrandizement. It appealed to Negro citizens, therefore, to join hands with workingmen who "like themselves are slaves of capital and politicians, and [to] strike for liberty."

In a speech at Sunbury, Pennsylvania, in 1868, Sylvis again emphasized the common struggle of white and Negro labor:

"No man in America rejoiced more than I at the downfall of Negro slavery," he declared. "But when the shackles fell from the limbs of those four million blacks it did not make them *free* men. . . . We are all one family of slaves together; and the labor reform movement is a second Emancipation Proclamation."<sup>69</sup>

On a trip through the South in February, 1869, he sent

the *Workingmen's Advocate* reports of his organization work on behalf of the National Labor Union among the unions in Wilmington, Baltimore, Richmond and Charleston, North Carolina. Negroes attended the union meetings and Sylvis reported that "they expressed themselves well pleased with our views." He hoped that the Negro people would join white labor, and saw how powerful this alliance could be. "If we can succeed in convincing these people that it is to their interest to make common cause with us in these great national questions, we will have power in this part of the country that will shake Wall Street out of its boots."<sup>70</sup> He reiterated his faith in the National Labor Union program and wrote from Augusta, Georgia: "Careful management and a vigorous campaign will unite the whole laboring population of the South, white and black, upon our platform. The people will be a unit here on the great money question because everybody is poor and ours is a war of poverty against a moneyed aristocracy."<sup>71</sup>

An upsurge of organization and strikes among Negro workers was looked upon with favor by Sylvis and other leaders of the National Labor Union, but little effort was made to bring Negro labor into existing unions or to organize Negro and white workers into new unions. Negro workers were seeking jobs in skilled trades and they wanted equality of opportunity with white workers. Members of the craft unions were showing no disposition to aid the Negro workers to break down the barriers of prejudice, and Negro labor had a justified and bitter grievance against the narrow craft exclusiveness which barred them from membership in the unions and from apprenticeship and skilled jobs. Furthermore, Negro labor was intensely

concerned with the struggle of the Negro people in the South for freedom, education, and land. As allies of white labor they hoped to achieve organization, improvement of their economic conditions, equal pay for equal work and equal rights in industry, and an alliance which would advance the general interests of Negro and white. Isaac Myers, Negro labor leader and president of the Colored National Labor Union,\* attending the convention of the National Labor Union as delegate in 1869, expressed these aspirations when he said:

"The white laboring men of this country have nothing to fear from the colored laboring men. We desire to see labor elevated and made respectable. We desire to have the hours of labor regulated . . . and you . . . can rely upon the support of the colored laborers of this country in bringing about this result. If they haven't observed these principles it was because the doors of workshops in North, East, and West were bolted against them. American citizenship with the black man is a complete failure if he is proscribed from the workshops of this country. . . . If American citizenship means anything at all, it means the freedom of labor, as broad and universal as the freedom of the ballot."<sup>73</sup>

The National Labor Union then adopted a resolution which urged Negroes to form organizations in all legitimate ways and to send delegates from every state in the union to the next convention for "the National Labor Union knows no North, no South, no East, no West,

\* The Colored National Labor Union was formed in 1869 as a federation of colored labor unions patterned after the National Labor Union. For a full discussion, see James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy*, pp. 165-75.

neither color nor sex on the question of the rights of labor."<sup>74</sup>

Sylviss' efforts for unity with Negro labor and the pronouncements of the National Labor Union did not yield results. Negro labor could hardly be expected to rally behind issues of currency reform and independent political action for labor when these did not bear directly on its most compelling needs. The memory of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation was still part of their experience, and their fervent hope that they could yet reap the fruits of their struggle for freedom through the program of the Radical Republicans overshadowed the possibility of winning them for the support of a labor party. The efforts of the leaders of the National Labor Union to direct their potential allies towards support of greenbackism and independent political action and the failure to recognize the basic issues in the struggle of the Negro people tended to estrange rather than unite Negro and white labor. By 1871, the Negro trade unionists had withdrawn from the National Labor Union.

### Women's Rights

Sylviss' views on the organization of working women and on women's rights were among the most advanced of his time. Not only was he in agreement with the position taken by the National Labor Union that women are entitled to equal pay for equal work, and must be organized to achieve this equality, but he championed the demands of the woman's rights movement led by the noted women leaders,



Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for equal suffrage.

Economic necessity had brought many thousands of women into factory employment during the Civil War. In 1860 about one-fifth of the factory workers were women and their number had increased sharply during the 'sixties. Work opportunities, however, were still limited and skilled trades were barred to women as they were to Negroes. Women in the sewing trades, hired in the thousands by contractors operating under government subsidy, made army clothing under conditions which aroused widespread protest. A memorial to the President from the sewing women of Cincinnati who characterized themselves as the "wives, widows, sisters, and friends of soldiers in the army of the United States depending on our own labor for bread" called attention to their miserable conditions of work. They stressed their loyalty and their willingness to work at government rates, but declared that they could not "sustain life" at the price paid by contractors. Their pleas went unheeded.<sup>75</sup> Wages paid by contractors were reported to average \$1.54 a week for women in New York and hours were eleven to sixteen a day.<sup>76</sup> Labor generally made gains in wages during the later war years though these were not commensurate with rising prices, but increases in wages for women were less than half of those for men.

The early women pioneers for equal rights set out to organize the working women, to broaden their employment opportunities and to arouse public opinion over their plight. Miss Anthony and Mrs. Stanton were leaders in setting up central associations of working women, in sev-

eral cities, which were known as the Working Women's Protective Union.\* In 1867, the New York union claimed to have found jobs for women in "seven branches of labor of a mechanical character not generally occupied by them."<sup>77</sup>

Sylvis supported the efforts of the women leaders from the outset. He pointed out to the molders in 1864 that unless women were organized there was danger of a general depression of the wage scale to the level of the low wages paid to women. He considered it the duty and responsibility of the organized workingmen to aid the women in their efforts to organize and especially to obtain the same wages for similar work.

After the establishment of the National Labor Union, he became one of the most vigorous advocates of equal rights for women. In 1867, he denounced the workingmen who were indifferent to the condition of women workers and declared that "as men struggling to maintain an equitable standard of wages and to dignify labor, we owe it to consistency, if not to humanity, to guard and protect the rights of female labor, as well as those of our own.... How can we hope to reach the social elevation for which we all aim without making women the companion of our advancement?"<sup>78</sup>

It was his firm conviction, moreover, that women should

\* The unions agitated for higher wages for women, appealed for jobs and conducted educational programs; they also attempted to establish co-operatives and insurance protection against illness and old age. The Working Women's Protective Union, recognized as a labor organization by the National Labor Union, contributed towards organizing women into the existing trade unions or into separate unions when they were barred from union membership.

have equal opportunities with men in education and in the professions. He cited the advances of women in those states where they had won the right to vote for school boards and to hold office and declared: "Why should women not enjoy every social and political privilege enjoyed by men? The time, I hope, is not far when universal suffrage and universal liberty will be the rule all over the world."<sup>79</sup>

Sylvis frequently used the columns of the women's rights journal, *The Revolution*, to present labor questions to workingmen and women and also addressed meetings of the Working Women's Protective Union.

The consistent support given by Sylvis and the National Labor Union to working women was far in advance of the policies of the national unions. Out of the thirty national unions in existence after 1860, only two, the printers and cigarmakers, admitted women to their ranks. The National Labor Union, the American affiliates of the International Workingmen's Association, and the eight-hour leagues also granted full membership rights to women.

The seating of Elizabeth Cady Stanton as a delegate to the New York Congress of the National Labor Union in 1868 created a sharp controversy among the delegates. Susan B. Anthony, representing the Working Women's Protective Union, Mrs. Mary Kellog Putnam of the same organization and Mrs. Mary MacDonald of the Women's Labor Union of Mount Vernon had been seated without contest. Opposition to Mrs. Stanton, who was accredited as delegate from the Women's Suffrage Association, developed on the ground that the latter was not a labor organization. Sylvis favored seating Mrs. Stanton, and spoke vigorously in her defense: "She is one of the boldest

writers of the age and has done more than anybody I know to elevate her class and my class too, and God knows they need elevation."<sup>80</sup> Mrs. Stanton was finally seated by a vote of 44 to 19. Later when eighteen of the opposing delegates threatened to leave the convention and resign from the National Labor Union, a resolution was offered to pacify them: "By the admission of Mrs. Stanton to this body the National Labor Congress does not regard itself as endorsing her peculiar ideas or committing itself to the question of female suffrage, but simply regards her as a representative from an organization having for its object 'the amelioration of the condition of those who labor for a living.'"

The congress, while not ready to endorse woman suffrage, pledged aid to the working women in facilitating organization into unions, demanded application of the eight-hour law to women workers, and urged Congress and the state legislatures to enact laws providing equal pay for equal work for women in government employ. Susan B. Anthony's effort to commit the National Labor Union to the support of the women in their struggle for the right to vote was defeated by those delegates who feared that the trade unions were not yet ready to accept and fight for this demand. *The Revolution* displayed some irritation on this score but it was nevertheless loud in its praise of the results of the congress. In an early issue following the New York session, Mrs. Stanton wrote:

"The delegates [more than a hundred] were of more than average ability, leaders equal to any men of the age. . . . The interests of the country would be safe in hands like these. In their discussion of great national questions . . .



their debates were superior to those of any body of statesmen ever assembled on this continent."<sup>81</sup>

The admission of four women delegates to the Congress of the National Labor Union in 1868 and the appointment of Kate Mullaney, president of the Collar Laundry Working Women's Union of Troy, New York, as assistant secretary and national organizer of women was praised by the women leaders as "a new era in workingmen's conventions." The Collar Laundry Working Women's Union of Troy with a membership of four hundred women had contributed \$1,000 to the striking molders during the great lockout of 1867. On his election as president of the National Labor Union in 1868, Sylvis gave public recognition to this act and proposed that Kate Mullaney, the union's president, whom he characterized as "the smartest and most energetic woman in America," be given the post of assistant secretary and organizer of women.

The women's rights leaders also approved the stand of the congress on an independent labor party and remarked editorially that "they have inaugurated the grandest movement of the century, proved themselves wise in reading the signs of the times and cunning in securing the only elements of faith and enthusiasm that will make the *New National Party of America*, the foundations of which they are now laying, triumphant in 1872. The producers, the workingmen and women, the Negroes, are destined to form a triple power that shall speedily wrest the sceptre of government from the non-producers, the land monopolists, the bond holders and the politicians."<sup>82</sup>

On another occasion, *The Revolution* expressed admiration for Sylvis' leadership of the labor congress: "In a

quiet unassuming way, in a few brief sentences, he disposed of question after question invariably carrying the congress with him almost unanimously and silencing all opposition."<sup>83</sup>

### International Labor Unity

The profound interest which Sylvis showed in the trade union movement abroad and in the great social struggles of the people in Europe against tyranny and oppression was revealed in his many speeches. His concern for the poverty and misery of the masses of Europe and his fear that a similar condition was rapidly approaching for the American people were reiterated frequently. He described England as a "pyramid but an inverted one, the apex of which rests upon a vast population... in short, it rests upon the shoulders of the toiling millions, who produce what the few monopolize." He deplored their low wages and miserable conditions and urged American labor to help them to "level to the ground these pyramids built of the blood and tears and groans of oppressed humanity... and to unite with them in one common brotherhood, combine them for one common purpose and together we will commence offensive war against the strongholds of monopoly and centralization."<sup>84</sup>

Early in his career as trade union leader, Sylvis sought to learn better methods of organization from the experiences of the British trade unions and the producers' cooperatives. He was in correspondence with the leaders of the molders' unions in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales and hoped to be able to establish an exchange of

information on the state of the trade in both countries with the objective of controlling the importation of strike-breakers and checking the activities of the American Emigrant Company.

No satisfactory understanding grew out of the exchange, and Sylvis complained bitterly against the union officials abroad. He accused them of collusion with American employers to encourage the emigration of molders here without acquainting them with the true state of affairs, in return for which the officials received a "head tax." Determined to reach the membership of these unions, Sylvis issued a circular for distribution in England and Scotland warning the workingmen against the swindle of the American Emigrant Company.<sup>85</sup> These experiences convinced him more than ever that international labor unity must be effected and that united action on all matters concerning labor must be achieved. In 1867 he told the molders:

"I have long been convinced of the beneficial results which would accrue to the interest of labor by an alliance with trade organizations throughout the world. Our aims, objects and interests are the same everywhere and I look upon this as the safest plan to prevent an unjust competition, because it would destroy the power of the capitalists to supplant workingmen struggling for their rights in one portion of the world by the importation of help from another. We could hold communication at close intervals and keep the producing classes informed of the movements of capitalists in both hemispheres. . . . In this particular, the Atlantic cable might prove as advantageous to us as it is to the others."<sup>86</sup>

## PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

Sylvis urged unity with the labor movement abroad as the means of eliminating prejudice among native workingmen against the foreign born, and said:

"Under existing circumstances, strangers from other countries are looked upon with suspicion if not with fear, when they approach our workshops. Their advent among us has so often proved an injury through the deception and misrepresentations of capitalists that we are loath to give them a cordial welcome. In this way a prejudice has been created and ill feeling engendered which ought never to exist. An alliance that would embrace in its membership every workingman, no matter where his lot might be cast, would ensure a hearty welcome to the toilers in every quarter of the globe. . . . Bound together by fraternal ties, having the same interests and feelings, recognizing membership in his trade organization as the only essential passport, we could build up a power that would defy the world."<sup>87</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that Sylvis followed with keen interest every development in the European labor movement and was receptive to efforts to bring about international unity of labor. This interest led him to follow the developments in, and to co-operate with, the International Workingmen's Association, known as the First International, which had been formed in 1864 in London through the efforts of Karl Marx and other European working class leaders. The International had held its first world congress in Geneva in 1866, close to the same date of the first congress of the National Labor Union in Baltimore. Karl Marx, who wrote the program of the Geneva congress, commented on the Baltimore convention of the



National Labor Union: "I am very pleased," said Marx, "with the American workers' congress at Baltimore. . . . The slogan there was organization for struggle against capital and, curiously enough, most of the demands which I drew up for Geneva were also put forward there by the correct instincts of the workers."<sup>88</sup>

Referring at another time to the similarity in program of the Geneva congress and the National Labor Union he noted that at the same time as the National Labor Union was putting forth the demand for an eight-hour day in Baltimore, the Geneva congress of the International Workingmen's Association . . . resolved that "a limitation of the working day is a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvement or emancipation must prove abortive. . . . The Congress proposes eight hours as the legal limit of the working day."<sup>89</sup>

To the request for a delegate to Geneva, the National Labor Union at its first meeting tendered the thanks of the organization "to the Central Organization of Labor in Europe together with a copy of the proceedings of this convention bidding them Godspeed in their glorious work." But lack of finances prevented the congress from sending a delegate.

The activities of the International Workingmen's Association and the decisions of the General Council were first reported fully in a weekly labor paper, the *National Workman*, the initial issue of which appeared in New York on October 13, 1866. The *National Workman* later became the official organ of the State Workingman's Assembly, headed by William J. Jessup, one of the corresponding secretaries of the National Labor Union and a close co-

worker of Sylvis. Following the congress of the National Labor Union in 1866, Jessup, a carpenter by trade, established connections with Robert Applegarth, secretary of the London Society of Carpenters and Joiners, who was also chairman of the General Council of the First International. Through Jessup and later by direct correspondence, Sylvis was able to keep in close touch with the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association. After his election as president of the National Labor Union, Sylvis continued to correspond with the officers of the First International.<sup>90</sup>

At the second congress of the National Labor Union, in 1867, Sylvis proposed that the congress "send an agent to Europe who could do great service in letting men know when we have strikes in this country and gain information from the people which he can transmit to the workingmen of this country." The congress adopted a resolution expressing sympathy and co-operation with the European workingmen "in their struggle against political and social wrongs," and, supporting a motion by Sylvis, elected Richard Trelvellick, a Detroit workingman and one of the leading labor organizers in the country, to the Lausanne congress of the First International. But again the National Labor Union could not provide the necessary funds for the trip.

It was not until 1869, after Sylvis' death, that the National Labor Union was finally able to send A. C. Cameron as delegate to the Basle congress, with funds advanced by Horace H. Day, a money reformer, who was taking an active part in the affairs of the National Labor Union.

Cameron did little to cement relations between the organizations. Although the delegates to the National Labor Union Congress were sympathetic to the establishment of fraternal relations with the International Workingmen's Association, no steps were taken towards a formal affiliation. In 1870, when the First International was confronting serious division within its ranks abroad, and the National Labor Union itself was entering the period of decline, attempts were made to establish working relations with the International.

Frederick Sorge, a delegate from the affiliated General German Workingmen's Association,\* proposed a resolution, which was adopted, endorsing the principles of the First International and expressing the intention of affiliating with it "at no distant date." But the affiliation was never consummated.

As president of the National Labor Union, Sylvis maintained cordial and friendly relations with the International. When danger of war between the United States and Great Britain appeared imminent in 1869,† the First

\* Sorge organized the Social Party in 1867 and later became corresponding secretary of the American section of the International Workingmen's Association. In 1869, the Social Party became affiliated with the National Labor Union as Labor Union 5, but withdrew in 1870 when the National Labor Union leaders were espousing money schemes and deflecting labor from a course best suited to its interests. In 1871, the organization became part of Section I of the North American Federation of the First International.

† Failure of the British Government to offer adequate compensation to the United States for damages wrought by the blockade-runner *Alabama* which had been built in Britain for the South brought a sharp attack from Senator Sumner, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and stimulated talk of war to annex Canada as reparations.

International addressed a communication to the workingmen of the United States through the National Labor Union.

On two previous occasions, the General Council of the First International felt it its duty to present the viewpoint of European labor on important political developments in the United States. A communication addressed to President Lincoln in 1865 and written by Karl Marx for the Council congratulated him on his re-election to the Presidency and predicted that just as resistance to slavery was the watchword of his previous election, so death to slavery was the "triumphant war cry" of his re-election. The letter expressed the hope that "as the American War of Independence initiated a new era for the middle classes so the American anti-slavery war will do for the working classes."

Lincoln's friendly reply to the First International in which he characterized its members as "friends of humanity and progress throughout the world" was reprinted in the British press. On the assassination of President Lincoln, the General Council wrote to President Johnson conveying the sorrow of European labor at the President's martyrdom.<sup>91</sup>

When America's relations with England, already tense as a result of the British government's sympathy for and aid to the Confederacy during the Civil War, became further strained the General Council once again appealed to American labor to prevent another armed conflict. The war had brought hardships to the American people, the appeal, written by Marx, said, but it had offered compensation in the liberation of the slaves and in the impulse it had



given to the working class movement. "Another war," Marx stressed, "which did not have for its objective the cause of the working people would prevent the development of an independent labor movement." He ventured to point out further the historic path which the American labor movement should take in the approaching period: "Yours then is the glorious task of seeing to it that at last the working class shall enter upon the scene of history, no longer as a servile following, but as an independent power, as a power imbued with a sense of its responsibility and capable of commanding peace where their would-be masters cry war."<sup>92</sup>

Sylvis' prompt and militant response to this appeal in June, 1869, was warmly received on the other side: He wrote:

"I am very happy to receive such kindly words from our fellow workingmen across the water; our cause is a common one. It is war between poverty and wealth; labor occupies the same low condition and capital is the same tyrant in all parts of the world. Therefore I say our cause is a common one. I, in behalf of the working people of the United States, extend to you and through you to those you represent, and to all the down-trodden and oppressed sons and daughters of toiling Europe, the right hand of fellowship. Go ahead in the good work you have undertaken, until the most glorious success crowns your efforts. That is our determination. Our late war resulted in the building up of the most infamous monied aristocracy on the face of the earth. This monied power is fast eating up the substance of the people. We have made war upon

it and we mean to win. If we can, we will win through the ballot box; if not then we will resort to sterner means."<sup>93</sup>

Sylvis' death, a month later, virtually ended the close personal relations which had existed between the officials of the National Labor Union and the General Council, although official communications continued to be exchanged.

### The Co-operative Movement

During the post-war depression, as the strikes of the molders' locals multiplied with consequent severe drain on the resources of the national union, Sylvis sought desperately for a course of action other than strikes to safeguard and advance the workingmen's living standards. In 1866 he had estimated that expenditures of more than a million dollars had been made on strikes by the locals and the national body since the beginning of the decade. At the Toronto convention of the molders in 1868, he gave the reasons for his changed outlook:

"I could see no prospects before us but that of continual trouble and taxation [assessments] and that unless we could adopt some plan that would show to our members a reasonable prospect of ultimate and permanent success and relief from strikes and taxation they would after a time become discouraged and give up the fight and allow the whole thing to fail. . . . From all parts of our widely extended organization the cry comes up—*something must be done.*"<sup>94</sup>

It was his belief that wealth and monopoly power arose out of exorbitant interest rates on money controlled by

the financiers of Wall Street and not out of the exploitation of labor. Yet in the system of wage labor, he recognized a source of poverty and an impediment to the economic advancement of workingmen. "The present unsatisfactory condition of labor," he told the molders, "is the effect of some great all-pervading cause [the system of wage labor] and the effects cannot be removed without first removing the cause." His solution was to abolish the wage system by the establishment of union co-operatives which he said would "divide the profits of labor among those who produce them, and drive the army of non-producers to honorable employment or starvation."<sup>95</sup> By a wide system of producers' co-operatives, he hoped that strikes would be eliminated, permanent relief would be brought to labor against poverty and unemployment, and the system of work for wages eventually abolished entirely.

Basic to the establishment of these co-operatives, he noted, was the existence of strong trade unions. But now Sylvis viewed the unions as having limited although important functions. He believed that they would continue to serve as valuable training schools for labor, but only as defensive instruments. Influenced by the erroneous program of the money reformers, he had come to believe with them that the "money power" alone, by controlling the country's credit and by exacting exorbitant interest rates, was the chief menace to labor. "If we have no political kings," Sylvis once said, "we have money kings and they are the worst kings in the world." He supported the demands of the money reformers for legislative action for

an inflationary paper money currency, abolition of the national banking system, easy credit and a fixed low rate of interest to be controlled by the government instead of the banks. The abolition of wage labor and the future of co-operation, he held, rested largely on these legislative reforms of the currency which could be won through independent political action by labor. Viewing this as the solution he declared that with the establishment of a just monetary system "there would no longer exist the necessity for trade unions."<sup>96</sup>

Similar views, advanced by middle class reformers, had aroused illusory hopes among workingmen abroad, and theories that producers' co-operatives would displace the profit system and thereby avoid class struggle were widely prevalent there.

Karl Marx who was guiding the struggles of the workingmen abroad indicated the fallacy of these ideas in the Inaugural Address delivered at the initial meeting of the International Workingmen's Association in 1864. He hailed the experiments in co-operation, initiated by the Rochdale pioneers in England, as proof that large-scale production could be carried on without the existence of a "class of masters employing a class of hands" and that, like slave labor and serf labor, wage labor was "destined to disappear before associated labor." But Marx pointed out that "the experience of the period from 1848 to 1864 has proved beyond doubt that, however excellent in principle and however useful in practice, co-operative labor, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth



in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even perceptibly to lighten the burden of their miseries."<sup>97</sup>

Marx showed that to have significant consequences co-operative labor must be developed to "national dimensions and consequently to be fostered by national means" and that therefore to "conquer political power has become the great duty of the working class." To this end Marx noted in the report which he prepared for the General Council and which was presented to the Geneva Congress of the International in 1866 that the trade unions were more than defensive instruments. They were, instead, organizing centers for the working class to embrace all workers still outside their ranks. Their functions were to improve the economic status of the workers but also to unite and stimulate the workers' participation in, and support of, the broader social and political movements and to work for the emancipation of the workers as a class.

After 1867, the molders' union under Sylvis' guidance launched a new program establishing co-operatives wherever there was a strike in progress, in the belief that these would eventually displace the employers in the industry. Co-operative foundries were set up in Troy, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and other cities with the financial assistance of the international union. But these did not absorb the interest of the molders for very long. Unable to compete with capitalist enterprise, the co-operatives soon found it necessary to break down union standards of work and conflict arose within the unions. The affairs of the union were diverted from trade union action to business matters,

which weakened them in the face of the growing power of the employers.\*

Sylvis did not at any time altogether abandon his reliance on the trade unions and the strike weapon. Even as late as January, 1868, when the molders' unions were involved in a number of long and bitter strikes as an aftermath of the lock-out of 1866-67 Sylvis reiterated in the columns of the *Iron Molders' Journal* that "our union is our stronghold and we must repel every assault no matter at what sacrifice and when the time comes we too can play at the same game of retaliation."<sup>98</sup>

Although he now pinned his hopes on co-operation, Sylvis continued to believe that the right to strike was inalienable and could never be justly prohibited by government.

### The Third Congress

The New York congress of the National Labor Union marked a high point in its development.

\* Meeting in convention in 1870, after Sylvis' death, the Iron Molders International Union appraised the situation regarding the co-operatives and admitted failure of the experiment. The presiding officer, in presenting the report of the National Union to the convention, advised the union against any action "looking towards becoming in part or in whole a co-operative association." He found the decisions of the Toronto convention presided over by Sylvis in 1868 "so far as eventually substituting co-operation as a panacea for our troubles in place of strikes...praiseworthy." But he noted that by first making legal strikes almost impossible and then "prescribing as a cure that which it was impossible to make available" every member and every union was left at the mercy of the employers. No further efforts at co-operation were undertaken by the international union thereafter. (From proceedings of the Iron Molders International Union, 1870.)

Before the congress convened, in June, 1868, Sylvis, William J. Jessup, and J. C. C. Whaley, the latter, president of the National Labor Union, addressed an open letter to all workingmen and women. This dramatic letter, which expressed alarm over the status of the workingmen at the time, was intended to rouse them to support of the forthcoming congress. It read:

"The evil effects of the late war are now telling sadly upon the masses and the heavy burdens of taxation have nearly paralyzed every branch of industry. Hundreds of thousands in this land of boundless resources who are both willing and able to work are without employment and with difficulty obtain the necessities of life and procure shelter for themselves and families. Other thousands who have employment—who toil early and late—forced to practice the most rigid economy... are compelled to live upon a scanty allowance of food, clothe themselves and families in the coarsest fabrics and narrowly escape the pitiable condition of those who have nothing to do.... The almost intolerable burdens of the war debt rest upon those who fought the battles and made the sacrifices, those who tilled the land to produce supplies and those who labored in the workshops to supply the *materiel* of war while the money kings who furnished the so-called 'sinews of war' (and got well paid for it) and kept out of danger are receiving exorbitant rates of interest upon their loans, amassing princely fortunes upon the misfortunes of their fellow countrymen....

"The aggregate earnings of all the industries of the country do not exceed 600 millions and one half of these earnings is absorbed by 5 per cent of the people, while 95

per cent of the people receive the remaining half or 300 million. A continuation of such a state of things must inevitably result in concentrating the wealth of the nation into the coffers of a few hundred millionaires... and leave us a few thousands of the middle class and many millions of paupers...."<sup>99</sup>

Among the eighty-three delegates who attended this congress of the National Labor Union, in addition to Sylvis, were the well-known labor leaders, Fincher, Jessup, and Richard Trevellick, and the woman's rights leaders, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. More of the money reformers and land reformers were in evidence than heretofore and there was a noticeable decline in representation from the eight-hour leagues. Ira Steward and his close followers among the leaders of the eight-hour movement were hostile to some planks in the program of the National Labor Union. They scorned monetary reforms as quack theories and at the same time held the narrow view that independent political action would only serve to divert labor from what they considered as its main objective—the achievement of the eight-hour day. They did not hesitate, however, to utilize the support of the two major parties for the realization of this objective.

The National Labor Union was now exerting considerable influence and was attracting the attention of the press. Sylvis, who was elected president at this session, estimated its strength to be 600,000 members.\*

The platform adopted at the convention of 1868 differed

\* Trade union membership has been estimated to have been 170,000 at this time. (John R. Commons and others, *History of Labor in the United States*, Vol. II. p. 47, New York, 1918.)



in no great essentials from that of the Declaration of Principles of 1867. While firm decisions were taken once again to establish a labor party, no plans were made for participation in the fall elections of 1868 and the convention turned its support to Samuel F. Cary of Ohio, a money reformer and a Democrat, whom it endorsed as candidate for Congress.

Money schemes overshadowed all other questions and consumed most of the discussion at the convention. A cleavage was rapidly developing among the delegates. Greenbackism was vigorously attacked by some of the trade unionists. Fincher, who opposed the introduction of politics into the unions, expressed opposition as well to the endorsement of woman suffrage. A number of delegates withdrew as a result of the seating of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Sylvis carried the convention in support of the platform but not without considerable debate and opposition. In answer to Fincher on the question of woman suffrage he pointed out that "the root of the whole matter [the labor question] lies in giving the ballot to all workers regardless of sex, color, or nationality" and he defended vigorously the need for independent political action by labor.

The question of co-operatives also agitated the delegates. Sylvis' own union which had adopted the name of the Iron Molders Co-operative and Protective Union at its convention of 1867 announced the operation of eleven co-operative union foundries. The carpenters and printers, having undertaken a similar program, were likewise concerned with co-operatives. But the interest manifested in this new avenue of labor activity did not provide the basis

for uniting the delegates. Wary of the trend of the convention, the trade unionists took a firm stand in defense of strikes. They successfully opposed the resolution on co-operation characterizing strikes as "unfortunate and unprofitable contests between capital and labor," which would disappear when "the principle of co-operation is universally recognized by all trades and callings." After heated debate the clause in the original platform deprecating strikes was also stricken out and replaced by a unanimous substitute motion that the convention "recognizes the right of workingmen and women to strike when all other just and equitable concessions are refused." The convention likewise expressed sympathy for the several labor unions on strike throughout the country.

Sylvis won unanimous endorsement for his proposal that a Department of Labor be established in the Federal government to concern itself with the improvement of the conditions of labor and with the distribution of the public domain. In arguing for the recognition of labor by government he declared:

"In this country of ballots and spread eagles, when we ask anything of Congress we are laughed at. I do not propose to be laughed at any longer. I am an enemy to every man who is against the class to which I belong."<sup>100</sup> It was not until twenty years later that the government agreed to the establishment of a bureau of labor statistics and a labor department was not incorporated into the government set-up until 1912.

After the convention, Sylvis, as the newly elected president of the National Labor Union, determined to build and strengthen the organization. Although he was without

funds, he set about this objective with the same degree of energy and persistence he had manifested in the work of consolidating the molders' union. In a circular published soon after the congress of 1868 he appealed to the workingmen and women to work for the cause which he described as a "gigantic task—a social and political revolution such as the world has never seen." He stressed the enormous task of organizing a new party, a workingmen's party, and urged that labor work toward electing a President in 1872 and controlling Congress and the State legislatures. "The day of monster monopolies and class legislation must come to a close," he wrote. Urging labor to take "the aggressive" and have confidence in its strength he declared that with labor in power "obnoxious laws would disappear from our statute books, plain practical laws for the protection and encouragement of the deserving will take their place and the drones who fatten upon the earnings of the poor will be compelled to make an honest living or starve."<sup>101</sup>

In a later circular Sylvis estimated that at least three thousand trade unions in the country understood the principles of the National Labor Union and could be involved in its work but he deplored the fact that the unions were holding aloof from the movement. Nor was this altogether surprising. The national unions were few and were striving to survive in the face of growing large-scale mechanized industry and the untiring efforts of the employers to prevent unionism from gaining a foothold among the workingmen. In the last years of the decade, national unionism had not made the advances comparable to those of the war years. Only four new national unions

were formed in the post-war years. The Machinists and Blacksmiths Union actually declined in membership, and the first national organization of coal miners had ceased to exist by the end of the decade.

A federation of trade unions as conceived by the leaders of the National Labor Union was an ideal based on labor's need to fulfill its new role. But it had not yet taken hold among most of the local unions which were grappling with the problems of organization and were not conscious of the importance of a united labor movement. Trade unions existed principally among the skilled crafts which had developed independently of each other through rank-and-file initiative and sacrifices. They were likely, therefore, to guard jealously their independent status. Trade union leaders like Sylvis who had seen, in advance of their time, that the power exerted by trade unions, united in a federation as beneficial to labor as a whole, were unfortunately becoming more absorbed by inflationary schemes than with meeting the stark realities confronting workingmen. This was illustrated in the fact that when the executive committee of the National Labor Union issued an appeal to Congress in December, 1868, to adopt its proposals for a paper currency and for the liquidation of the national debt, it neglected to make any reference whatsoever to the economic demands of the workingmen.

In order to gain new affiliates for the National Labor Union and at the same time to organize for the molders' union, Sylvis, with his customary zeal and determination, undertook a field trip to the South together with Richard Trellick. During their three months' tour through the Southern states, they were able to establish twenty-six new



branches of the National Labor Union. At the same time Sylvis organized ten new locals of the molders' union and re-established three unions which had ceased to function.

On his return to Philadelphia, Sylvis turned his attention to developing closer relations between the National Labor Union and the Congress of the United States. For the first time in the history of labor, an active labor lobby of five resident members of the National Labor Union was established in Washington. Its function, as described by the executive committee, was to bring pressure on Congressmen for the enactment of labor legislation and to take advantage of opportunities to advance the work of the National Labor Union.

The efforts of the National Labor Union and the eight-hour leagues had finally resulted in a law adopted by Congress on June 25, 1868, establishing the eight-hour day for laborers, mechanics, and workmen in government employ. This was the first official recognition of labor's demands by the Federal government since the ruling by President Martin Van Buren in 1836 which established a ten-hour day for government employees. Upon enforcement of the eight-hour law, the Navy Department declared a corresponding cut in wages. Sylvis was quick to take up the grievances of the government employees and to press for redress. When it appeared clear that President Johnson and Attorney General Hoar, who upheld the action of the Navy, were collaborating with Navy officials to prevent the spread of eight-hour legislation by discrediting it as a wage-cutting device, Sylvis wrote to President-elect Grant in the hope that he would make some statement favorable to labor's cause in his inaugural address. But

Grant did not even read the letter and the *Workingmen's Advocate* reported bitterly that he was hostile to labor and entirely in sympathy with the "money power." Sylvis vigorously denounced this misuse of government power in a sharp note to the Attorney General:

"There seems to be no desire on your part nor among your superiors at Washington to do anything for the people. Congressmen and Senators can raise their wages with impunity.... Swindling railroad corporations, land rings, gold rings, whiskey rings, bondholders' rings and the representatives of other kinds of swindles can receive kind words and privileges, but workingmen must be insulted and take back seats.... We still hold the ballot in our hands and by a judicious use of it, we can ultimately gain what is justly due us but now withheld by those placed in official positions by our votes."<sup>102</sup>

Mounting protests finally forced an order from the President to rescind the wage cut. In his letter of thanks, Sylvis commented with considerable irony that "the faithful fulfillment of official pledges, the rigidly honest construction and administration of law is not the rule but the exception; so that it has become customary to especially thank officials when in a moment of aberration they condescend to equitably legislate, administer or interpret."

### Decline of the National Labor Union

The high hopes which Sylvis cherished for the ability of the National Labor Union to organize an independent political party of labor were not to be realized. The conventions of 1869, 1870, and 1871 were held without

Sylvis' guidance. The National Labor Union, in these final years, far more than previously, became the instrument of middle-class reformers, who were soon to ally themselves with the Democratic Party. After the congress of 1869, the disintegrating influences of their panaceas were clearly felt. It is doubtful whether, had Sylvis lived, even he would have been able to check the decline of this first great effort of labor to combine its forces.

The congress of 1869 meeting a few weeks after Sylvis' death bore the stamp of his devoted efforts to strengthen the organization. Labor organizations predominated in the representation of the 142 delegates who attended. Richard Trevellick was elected president and the main emphasis of the congress was placed on the need to proceed with the organization of the labor party in preparation for the Presidential campaign of 1872. When the congress convened again in 1870, fewer trade union delegates were in evidence. The reformers were now firmly in the saddle in the National Labor Union and the trade unionists were definitely withdrawing their support from an organization which was no longer responsive to their most pressing needs. Planks in the platform previously adopted relating to the organization of women, contract labor, settlement on public lands, better housing, and restoration of civil rights to all citizens were dropped. The principal additions to the program dealt with tariff and monetary reforms.

When the Labor Reform Party was finally launched in 1871, it was declared to be separate from the National Labor Union, but it endorsed the latter's platform.

The threat of independent political action and of a po-

tential alliance of labor, the farmers, and the Negro people held forth by the National Labor Union had caused considerable apprehension in the ranks of the rising class of industrialists. Press attacks on the congresses, after 1868, revealed anxiety and even alarm that such an alliance in an independent political party might assume challenging proportions and jeopardize the newly won power of the industrial and financial interests. Typical of this comment was that of the *New York Tribune* of August 21, 1869, which warned that if the workingmen succeed in constituting a new political party "they are likely to have more strength than they can possibly use." It declared further that "it [the new labor party] will bring into the political arena a number of questions hitherto excluded and regarded by many as subjects foreign to such agitation. Among these subjects are things more vital than the eight-hour laws. Declarations involving broader issues of social and political economy and organization are to be pressed by the workingman. If we are to judge by this congress he will demand *legislation for his own benefit* which it is declared is now refused, or if obtained only at the cost of the most ruinous agitation."

Other papers joined the campaign to discredit political action by the congresses which were condemned as "farfetched," "windy," "frothy," and "demagogic."

The alliance of labor, the Negro people, and the farmers was, however, not consummated. The Negro people could not fulfill their aspirations through the program of the National Labor Union. The farmers were soon to throw their weight to the Democratic Party which was quick to take over their demands for an inflationary currency and



incorporate them into its platform. The labor movement was now facing a corporate power which had developed during the Civil War and had secured its domination over the political life of the country with the military defeat of the South. The new Labor Reform Party could not offer to this labor movement the support it needed through a program of currency reform. In the fall elections in 1871, the Labor Party received the support of the miners, but failed to elect any of its candidates. In Massachusetts the Labor Party also showed some strength. But independent political action by labor was destined to face delay and long postponement until labor could establish its class organizations, consolidate its strength, and clarify its program.

When the National Labor Union met again in the fall of 1871, it could muster only twenty delegates and in the following year the first national federation of trade unions passed from the American scene. Labor had turned away from greenbackism to the realities of trade union struggle. By this time the affiliates of the First International in the United States were stimulating the workingmen to united action in behalf of the eight-hour-day movement and in support of the bitterly fought miners' strike in Pennsylvania. New impetus to union organization was evident and by 1872 the number of organized workers had increased to an estimated 300,000.<sup>103</sup>

The National Labor Union had failed to become the established federation of the trade unions but its basic idea remained. With the accumulated experience of the post-Civil War years, the unions soon revived their efforts to establish a new national federation to meet the increasing

attacks by employers on their fundamental democratic rights and on their living standards. The need for united action was finding expression in the formation of the Knights of Labor which emerged at the end of the 'seventies as the next significant effort of American workingmen to organize nationally.

The National Labor Union was the creation of socially minded workingmen's leaders, of whom Sylvis was foremost. His far-sighted, able, and zealous leadership gave life to the idea. The federation during its most constructive period had given great impetus to the eight-hour movement and to the organization of workingmen and women. But it was unable to survive after the loss of Sylvis' leadership. For the unions, which had been its chief support, were few and only in their earliest stages of development, and the program of the federation was deflected into by-paths which had little relevance to the major problems before labor in an era of rapid capitalist expansion and control over industry and government.

## V. "A VALIANT CHAMPION"

In the midst of his activities as president of the National Labor Union Sylvis died suddenly on July 26, 1869, at the age of forty-one from a stomach ailment with which he had been confined to bed for four days. Richard Trevellick, the Detroit labor organizer who had been a constant companion during the Southern tour, was at his bedside when he died. Sylvis' sudden death created a near panic in the ranks of the molders' union. Leaders of the National Labor Union, who were preparing for the fourth convention to be held in Philadelphia in September, were equally concerned about the future of the organization without Sylvis' tried leadership. Announcement of his death in the *Workingmen's Advocate* appeared side by side with the publication of the call to the convention, which had been written by Sylvis just before his death. These last words of Sylvis were a clarion call to the people to organize and struggle. He appealed to all engaged in productive industry to attend the convention and conceived of it as a great people's movement with labor as its basic core. The final words of the call were a stirring appeal to immediate action:

"Let workingmen everywhere without regard to place or occupation be up and awake, busy in the great work of organizing for the last grand struggle of human liberty. . . . Organize everywhere and send in your delegates to the coming convention and let us send forth an emancipation proclamation that will carry renewed hope to every

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oppressed individual in the land. We are engaged in a huge struggle. Honesty versus corruption, freedom versus tyranny, the people against a monied aristocracy . . . that is fast reducing the whole industrial people of the country to mere vassals to contribute to Wall Street and its satellites. Who shall win? Let the People Answer."<sup>104</sup>

As the news of Sylvis' death spread, letters and resolutions from local unions and from labor leaders poured into the *Workingmen's Advocate*. These gave evidence of the profound respect in which Sylvis had been held by the workingmen as an honest, uncompromising, and devoted leader of labor. Among them was the following letter from the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, dated August 18, 1869, signed by Karl Marx, George Eccarius and others:

"The sad tidings that death has so unexpectedly and prematurely removed your honored and able President William H. Sylvis, a loyal, persevering and indefatigable worker in the good cause from among you, have filled us with indefatigable grief and sorrow. The great brotherhood and sisterhood of toil can but ill afford to lose such tried champions in the bloom of life as him whose loss we mourn in common. But though able counsellors and tried leaders are not over abundant, we find consolation in the knowledge that there are others in your ranks willing and able to serve you in his stead and with the same zeal and devotion. We are reassured that your present session will select the right men for the right place and make arrangements that will enable you to continue the great struggle without any interruption and insure its success."<sup>105</sup>



The concluding paragraph of the General Council's report on the fourth annual congress of the International Workingmen's Association, presented in December, 1869, reproduces Sylvis' last letter to the General Council (see pages 92-93) as "homage to his memory as a valiant champion of our cause."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, too, paid final tribute to Sylvis in the pages of *The Revolution*, in the following words:

"The workingmen have sustained an irreparable loss in the death of William H. Sylvis, who as thinker and writer was among the first men of our day. . . . The leading men in these labor organizations are just waking up to new views of statesmanship."<sup>108</sup>

The press throughout the country reported his death and there was universal acknowledgment that he was a great leader whose honesty, integrity, and loyalty to the cause of labor had never faltered. The accounts noted that Sylvis died in extreme poverty, because throughout his life he could not be swerved from his purpose by bribes, rewards, or intimidation. The *Workingmen's Advocate* expressed its bereavement by devoting several issues to Sylvis. It printed an extensive account of his life and work and called for the establishment of a national monument to his memory.

At the Basle Congress of the International Workingmen's Association in September, 1869, A. C. Cameron, the American delegate, paid tribute to Sylvis' leadership:

"I feel I cannot conclude without referring to the untimely loss of our honored chieftain, Mr. Sylvis, a man who had obtained a world-wide celebrity, whose name,

familiar as a household word, had become indissolubly connected with the labor reform movement. Possessed of an indomitable energy, an extraordinary force of character and executive ability, he was of all leaders the one qualified to organize and consolidate the labor element in the New World. Cut off in the very zenith of his fame, when a life of usefulness was unfolding itself, and when his efforts were beginning to yield their fruits, his loss is almost irreparable. We trust, however, that others will be raised up to take his place, and that his death will nerve his followers to more united and determined action."\*

In reply, the presiding officer of the Congress expressed the sorrow of European labor at the loss of Sylvis.

The National Labor Union congress, meeting a few weeks after his death, set up a committee to prepare an address to the workingmen and women of the country on Sylvis' work and to establish a memorial fund, part of which was to support his family. At later conventions it was reported that funds received for the memorial were small and it finally failed to materialize, nor was the address ever published. Sylvis' four children by his first wife, who had died in 1865, were separated and sent to live among friends while his widow and child were provided for by a small insurance fund. It was not until 1886 that the Iron Molders International Union took steps to commemorate Sylvis, after Richard Trevellick, then an old man but still active in the labor movement, urged the delegates in a speech before the convention to honor Sylvis' work in founding the union. A granite monument was erected to him by the

\* For a complete report of Cameron's speech at the Basle Congress see Appendix, page 121.

International and his burial grounds outside Philadelphia were purchased as a memorial.

William H. Sylvis was a product of a period when the strivings of the people were a composite of their yearnings for a return of the old world of agrarian democracy and their efforts to adjust their lives to a new world of changing class relationships. His great contribution lay in his devotion to the working people; in his zeal and perseverance in helping all of labor, whether Negro or white, women or foreign-born, to organize; and in his uncompromising, militant stand against those who had usurped the people's rights. He hoped for a world where men could live fully; a world free from profit and greed, from exploitation of man by man and from sinister reaction which arises from the ruthless power exerted by a few owners over the people. His concern with the future of labor was far more advanced than that of his fellow craft unionists who, in avoiding the pitfalls of reform, were strangled and paralyzed by their efforts to conform.

To Sylvis, the growth of corporate industry and finance and the control they exerted over government, which developed during his lifetime, were a violation of the basic principles of American democracy upon which the country was founded. He sought remedy in the use of the instruments of democracy to keep America a country of small producers with widespread ownership of land, wide distribution of wealth among the people, and opportunity for all in fields which were now rapidly becoming the exclusive privilege of a few. Along with most other social reformers of this period of transition, Sylvis failed to understand

the dynamics of the new class situation which was soon to provide no alternative for labor but to gather its forces for the coming struggle for power. Nor could he, therefore, clearly map the path which labor must take to achieve its aspirations for a true democracy.

None the less he stands out as a great pioneer leader whose efforts advanced labor along the road to stronger organization and toward the objective of taking its place as an independent class force in society. Where he erred he did so not because of lack of high ideals and nobility of purpose in the interests of his class.

Sylvis pioneered in building trade unions and seeking to embrace within labor's ranks workers of all trades regardless of skill, sex, color, or nationality at a time when there was no possibility of learning from the successes and failures of the methods of previous leaders. In this basic work the labor movement can trace the first beginnings of stable organization and of the broader conception of industrial unionism. Few trade union leaders, until recent years, have been so outspoken on the issues of international class solidarity and on the rights of women and Negroes. His zeal for the building of a labor party marks him as the first leader of a craft union who recognized that labor must free itself from the influence of the parties controlled by capitalism and take an independent and leading role in behalf of the people's interests.

American labor has made great strides since Sylvis' day but many of the problems with which he grappled are still among the primary tasks before the trade union movement. The organization of the unorganized workers is still incomplete. A labor party, which is a crucial step, if labor is



to take its place as a leading force in the affairs of the nation, has not emerged from its embryonic stages. The interests of labor and the nation make imperative the unity of labor and the realization of international labor solidarity now in order to preserve our democratic rights in the face of menacing fascism. White labor has not yet included the great masses of Negro labor within its fold, nor has it given sufficient aid to the Negro people in their fight for full equality in politics, industry, and in social life.

Sylvis took a far-sighted and courageous stand on all these issues as they presented themselves in his day and thus established the pattern of a militant tradition that may well serve as an inspiring example. His qualities of integrity, perseverance, self-sacrifice, and uncompromising loyalty set a high standard for leadership and give him the right to a place in the front rank of America's militant labor leaders.

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- <sup>3</sup> Richard T. Ely, *The Labor Movement in America*, p. 43, New York, 1886.
- <sup>4</sup> Edward Stanwood, *A History of the Presidency*, p. 239, New York, 1928.
- <sup>5</sup> Terence V. Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor (1859-1889)*, p. 30, Columbus, Ohio, 1889.
- <sup>6</sup> H. S. Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy*, p. 192, New York, 1941.
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- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, Jan. 8, 1861.
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- <sup>13</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
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- <sup>20</sup> Arthur C. Cole, *The Irrepressible Conflict*, p. 315, New York, 1934.
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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 611.  
<sup>24</sup> H. S. Zahler, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-96.  
<sup>25</sup> Wesley Mitchell, *A History of the Greenbacks*, p. 350, Chicago, 1903.  
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<sup>30</sup> From an address to the Iron Molders International Union Convention, Buffalo, 1864.  
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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*  
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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.  
<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.  
<sup>36</sup> From an address to the Iron Molders International Union Convention, Chicago, 1865.  
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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>40</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 166.  
<sup>41</sup> From an address to the Iron Molders International Union Convention, Boston, 1867.  
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<sup>43</sup> From an address to the Iron Molders International Union Convention, Boston, 1867.  
<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 287, New York, 1939.  
<sup>45</sup> Editorial, *The Nation*, Oct. 26, 1865, Vol. I, No. 17, p. 516.  
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<sup>50</sup> Reprinted in *Documentary History of American Industrial Society*,

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.  
<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>55</sup> *Workingmen's Advocate*, Apr. 21, 1866.  
<sup>56</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 72.  
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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.  
<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 182-83.  
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<sup>64</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 181.  
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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>67</sup> From proceedings of the Iron Molders International Union Convention, Boston, 1867.  
<sup>68</sup> *Workingmen's Advocate*, Dec. 26, 1868.  
<sup>69</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 233.  
<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 341.  
<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>72</sup> John R. Commons and others, *op. cit.*, p. 227.  
<sup>73</sup> *Workingmen's Advocate*, Sept. 11, 1869.  
<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 4, 1869.  
<sup>75</sup> John R. Commons and others, *op. cit.*, p. 72.  
<sup>76</sup> E. D. Fite, *Industrial Conditions in the North During the Civil War*, p. 186, New York, 1910.  
<sup>77</sup> Report on Condition of Women and Child Wage Earners in the United States, Senate Document, No. 645, 61st Congress, 2nd Session, 1909-10, Vol. IX, p. 17.  
<sup>78</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 218.  
<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.  
<sup>80</sup> *The Revolution*, Sept. 21, 1868, Vol. II, No. 13, p. 204.  
<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.



<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, July 2, 1868, No. 26, p. 405.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-51.

<sup>85</sup> From proceedings of the Iron Molders International Union Convention, Boston, 1867.

<sup>86</sup> From an address to the Iron Molders International Union Convention, Boston, 1867.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Karl Marx, *Letters to Kugelmann*, p. 40, New York, 1934.

<sup>89</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 287, New York, 1939.

<sup>90</sup> H. Schlueter, *The First International*, p. 58, Chicago, 1918.

<sup>91</sup> For full text of all three letters, see Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, pp. 279-88, New York, 1937.

<sup>92</sup> Full text in *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy*, by James S. Allen, pp. 247-48, New York, 1937.

<sup>93</sup> John R. Commons and others, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

<sup>94</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>96</sup> Circular to trade unions, Oct. 1868. See James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>97</sup> *Founding of the First International*, p. 36, New York, 1937.

<sup>98</sup> *Iron Molders Journal*, Jan. 1868.

<sup>99</sup> *The Revolution*, June 4, 1868, Vol. I, No. 22, p. 339.

<sup>100</sup> From proceedings of the National Labor Union, p. 26, New York, 1868.

<sup>101</sup> James C. Sylvis, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>103</sup> John R. Commons and others, *History of Labor in the United States*, Vol. II, p. 47, New York, 1918.

<sup>104</sup> *Workingmen's Advocate*, Aug. 7, 1869.

<sup>105</sup> Reprinted in *Workingmen's Advocate*, Sept 18, 1869.

<sup>106</sup> *The Revolution*, Aug. 26, 1869, Vol. IV, No. 8, p. 120.

## APPENDIX

### Report of A. C. Cameron, delegate of the National Labor Union to the International Workingmen's Association at Basle, and Eulogy of William H. Sylvis \*

... The President then called on Mr. Cameron, the American delegate, to address the meeting. He said: Mr. President and Members of the fourth International Congress,—It gives me great pleasure, I assure you, in the name and in behalf of the working men of America, to tender you their heartfelt sympathies, and bid you God speed in the noble work in which you are engaged—the elevation and emancipation of the toiling millions throughout the world, and the advance of those glorious times

*When man to man the world o'er  
Shall brothers be and a' that;*

when the sword shall be turned into the plowshare, and the spear into the pruning-hook; when tyranny and oppression of every kind and character shall be uprooted and destroyed, and when the laborer, intelligent and disenthralled, shall occupy that position which the Maker of all intended he should occupy—to reap the full reward of his labor. My presence here today, my fellow-delegates, is an evidence that your friends in the New World recognize a common interest existing between the sons of labor the world over, and that they trust

\* Excerpt from report of proceedings of session of the fourth congress of the International Workingmen's Association (First International), held at Basle, Switzerland, September, 1869.

the time is drawing nigh when their ranks shall present a united front, under a banner upon whose ample folds shall be inscribed the words, "Truth, Justice, and Equality," they shall march to certain victory. The workmen of our association have cut themselves off from both the political parties which have hitherto occupied such a prominent position, believing that the interests of labor, both in our State and National Councils must be represented by those taken from the ranks of labor, and that so long as our laws are framed by those whose interests under our defective social system are antagonistic to our own, and whose selfish interests demand their perpetuation, it is useless, and worse than useless, to expect redress from those who have created the evils of which we complain, unless we proceed on the homeopathic principle, "*Similia similibus curantur*," a principle which we think we have recognized long enough. But I forbear. To those desirous of leaving the overcrowded districts of the Old World, and seeking a *home* beyond the sea—

*Where a man is a man, if he's willing to toil,  
And the poorest may reap of the fruits of the soil,*

I am instructed to extend a cordial invitation and hearty welcome. To all such I say, "You will find friends and brothers ready to take you by the hand." All we ask is that you will come as friends, prepared to strengthen our hands, and support us in the demand for the right, and we ask no more; and refuse to allow yourselves to be made the tools of designing men, who, under the specious pretense of subserving your interests, are aiming only to thwart and humiliate the aims of your best and truest friends—the trades' unionists of America. The establishment of an Emigration Bureau, under the joint control of the American Labor Union and the International Working Men's Association, from which reliable data could at

all times be derived, would, in my humble judgment, be fraught with the happiest results. And I feel warranted in saying that any proposition coming from you to this effect will be cordially seconded by our Executive Committee.

I feel I cannot conclude without referring to the untimely loss of our honored chieftain, Mr. Sylvis, a man who had obtained a world-wide celebrity, whose name, familiar as a household word, had become indissolubly connected with the labor reform movement. Possessed of an indomitable energy, an extraordinary force of character and executive ability, he was of all leaders the one qualified to organize and consolidate the labor element in the New World. Cut off in the very zenith of his fame, when a life of usefulness was unfolding itself, and when his efforts were beginning to yield their fruits, his loss is almost irreparable. We trust, however, that others will be raised up to take his place, and that his death will nerve his followers to more united and determined action.

In conclusion allow me, my friends, to again return you my sincere thanks for the kind and enthusiastic reception which I have received at your hands, and which it will be my pleasure to communicate the nature of to my constituents. Let my visit, gentlemen, be the inauguration of a system which will secure the attendance of the representatives of both countries at our future annual conferences, as from such fraternal meetings the happiest results may be anticipated. I trust, therefore, you will follow our example—that in our Cincinnati Congress, in August, 1870, we shall have the pleasure of returning the compliment, and returning to your representative a true Western welcome. Again accept my desire, and the desire of my constituents, for your continued usefulness and prosperity.

This oration was translated into French and German, and received with the same enthusiastic applause as Mr. Cameron had been on his entry into the hall, with this slight difference,



that it was not quite so unanimous, as all the delegates did not understand the three languages, and had to wait their turn to understand the drift of it.

The President replied with a few pertinent remarks, expressing a hope that a European delegate may return the compliment next year in Cincinnati, and assuring Mr. Cameron that the loss of the late Mr. Sylvis was appreciated by the working men of Europe, and particularly by the members of the Association. Anything that seriously affected the working class movement in either hemisphere must necessarily react upon the other, as the progress made in either was to a certain extent a stimulus to exertion in the other.

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